TOWARD LEARNER EMPOWERMENT AND ADULT
SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING IN
DISTANCE EDUCATION

THERESE HOGAN-ROYLE

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Toward Learner Empowerment and Adult Self-Directed Learning

in

Distance Education

by

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Abstract

This research in the field of adult education is intended to expand understanding of the complexity of the relationships between the constructs of adult distance education, student empowerment and self-directed learning.

I hold these assumptions: empowerment or, in Starhawk's (1987) words, expansion or unfolding of the adult learner's innate capabilities or powers-from-within, promotes self-directed learning. By comparison, lack of student power or student disempowerment is a critical factor which contributes to low levels of self-directed learning and high levels of dissatisfaction and attrition. These conditions are not uncommon to the adult distance education.

I implemented an intervention model, to include what I consider essential to empowerment, namely the components of critical reflection and rational discourse. The model is intended to facilitate the development of the adult learner's power-from-within. From this research, I have found that this empowering model, and specifically the components of critical reflection, and rational discourse within a supportive group, to be extremely effective in nurturing the power that resides within the student. An empowered student, I propose, is able to direct his or her own learning.

I hope to contribute to the conceptual base laid down concerning the interdependency between student empowerment and adult self-directed education. The theory and model can be applied, not only in an adult graduate education setting, but in other educational settings, in order to achieve a more emancipatory and democratic interaction.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Study

Demographers inform us that the population of adult learners in post secondary

educational institutions is steadily increasing. In the decade between 1975 and 1985, as recorded

by Snyder (1991), the enrollment of students between the ages of 25-45 increased by 144% (p.

47). Slotnick et al (1993) predict that as we approach the millennium, we will see that the largest

increase in student population will continue to be that of the the adult learner (p. 4). These

statistics should indicate a warning to educators of adults, to be prepared to accept the

responsibility of meeting the learning needs of the new, rapidly growing student population, the

adult learner population..

The adult learner has expressed a need for alternative modes of delivery, that is, other than

the traditional on-campus lecture mode. Modra (cited in Evans & Nation, 1987) avows:

> it is the role of education and educators to help usher in a more just and humane society
> and to critically engage society in order to transform it, yet society's view on humanity,
> and the means to assist the growth and development of that quality, are so divergent that
> is not possible to provide one mode of education which can openly and honestly
> accommodate different world views which generate them (p.23).

One could claim that distance education, as an alternative mode of educational delivery,

has become almost synonymous with the education of adults in post secondary educational

institutions. In 1996, the Open University of Britain, one of the oldest distance education

institutes in the world, graduated over 150,000 distance students. On this continent, in Ontario

alone, over 100,00 adult distance education students are registered at the Independent Learning

Centres. Moreover, at the Open Newthink Conference of British Columbia, Calvert (1984) reports, it was contended that "distance education will become the primary mode of university education" (p. 78). We are already seeing this prediction validated.

Research into the theory and practice of adult education, and particularly of distance education, is needed to inform post secondary educators how they can best provide for the educational needs of the adult learner, and as well, meet the growing demand for the new delivery mode of adult education, distance education.

In this study I plan to implement an empowerment model which is intended to facilitate the process of self-directed learning for the adult distance learner.

Definition of Terms

Distance education, self-directed learning, andragogy, critical reflection and rational discourse are the major constructs presented in this study. The last two concepts cited here are essential components of the empowerment intervention model which I implemented in this study. Brief definitions of each one of these constructs are presented at this time and more comprehensive descriptions are provided in Chapter 11, Review of the Literature.

> Distance Education. Keegan (1986) defines distance education as follows:

> Distance education is the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learners throughout the length of the learning process; this distinguishes it from face-to-face education; the influence of an educational organization, both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services; this distinguishes it from private study and teach yourself programs; the use of technical media: print, audio, video or computer. to unite teacher and learner and to carry the content of the course; the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue, this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education; the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so

that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes (p. 49).

Self-Directed Learning. Knowles (1980) defines self-directed learning as " a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material sources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes " (p. 18).

Andragogy. Andragogy is described as a set of principles which is specifically descriptive of adult learning and development. Andragogy holds these assumptions: adult learners value autonomy and independence and they prefer an independent or self-directed learning process; adult learners have accumulated rich reservoirs of experiences which, upon reflection, serve as valuable resources for learning; adult learners value relevant, problem-oriented course content which provides for immediate application and enhanced performance (Knowles, 1970).

Empowerment. Although there are several interpretations of this term, I have identified Starhawk's (1987) definition of empowerment as most descriptive of and relevant to this study. Starhawk (1987) terms the concept 'power-from-within'. She states that power-from-within is linked to a sense of competence and joy at one's unfolding capacities as it arises from being able.

Critical Reflection. Boud, Keough, and Walker (1985) describe critical reflection as a "generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation" (p. 3). Mezirow (1990) further explains, "reflection would include making inferences, generalizations and

analogies, discriminations, and evaluations, as well as feeling, remembering, and solving problems" (p. 4).

<u>Rational Discourse.</u> Rational discourse involves discussions which provide opportunities for participants to express experiences, perceptions, ideas and opinions. Rational discourse provides room to explore new ways of doing things, to generate new questions, to develop new understandings. It is a means of connecting with others, of pooling reflections and insights and of developing alliances with those who share and support ideas, interpretations, and concerns.

In conclusion, I pose two assumptions. First of all, the concepts of adult education at the post-graduate level and self-directed learning ought to define each other. As the literature reveals, both the population of adult learners in post secondary institutions and the demand for a practice of learning which is appropriate to adults, is increasing. Added to this is the fact that the demand for innovative or alternative methods of educational delivery, is dramatically increasing. Educational theory and practice, appropriate to the education of adult learners, must reflect an approach other than the traditional on-campus pedagogical approach. Self-directed learning provided through the distance mode of delivery would represent an approach which could satisfy those demands.

Secondly, I propose that the construct of empowerment is linked to that of adult self-directed learning. The assumptions of andragogy state that the psychological attributes of independence and responsibility characterize adulthood. In fact self-direction is not only the goal of adult education but in fact is, as Ashcroft (1987) recommends, a foundation for a philosophy of

adult education. Would it not follow, that nurturing and fostering the development, expansion and expression of these innate psychological attributes of independence and responsibilty involve developing power that resides within the student or empowering the student. Empowerment or development, of what Starhawk (1987) terms, 'power-from-within' the student is crucial to the success, goals, and philosophy of self-directed learning and essential, as Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) contend, to adult learning and development.

Purpose of the Research

Empowerment, contend Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) is a central dynamic of emancipatory education. Ashcroft (cited in Kreisberg, 1992) goes as far as to recommend that "empowerment be the basis of the philosophy of education" (p. 134).

My research purpose is to study the process of empowerment of adult distance graduate students who in fact, may possibly be one of the most disempowered groups in any university. That the psychological attribute of, what Starhawk (1987) terms, 'power-from-within' be developed, and that the expression of this power, in the form of student generated learning contracts, be demonstrated, is central to the purpose of this research. Knowles (1980) would support my research purpose, as he informs us that the primary purpose of adult education is to promote the development of the student's ability to direct his/her own learning process. He states that one of the prime responsibilities as educators of all students, both on-campus and distance, requires first of all, that they be professionally bound to strive to develop students who are not dependent and passive but to help develop students to independently direct their own education.

As studies reveal that most programs are teacher-directed , and not student -directed, educators cannot continue to ignore the critical responsibility that they must assume in facilitating student empowerment and the expression of this power, student-directed learning.

My intent is to implement an empowerment model to a focus group of adult distance students. The model will provide activities designed to identify, expand and develop the innate powers of the student and provide opportunities through which this power will be demonstrated.

The Empowerment Model

The model consists of three phases: the Confrontation Phase, the Healing Phase and the Demonstrating Phase. Two components, critical reflection and rational discourse, are ingredients of each phase of the model. I propose that these components are major and essential considerations contributing to the nurturing and expansion of the adult learner's power-from-within. Other researchers would support my design which includes training in and use of specific skills. Research conducted by Danis and Tremblay (1988) reveals that once individuals have mastered certain competencies they were better able to specify learning goals and preferred learning procedures. Dunst (cited in Beare and Slaughter, 1993) claims that empowerment consists of "enabling experiences provided ... that foster autonomy, choice, control and responsibility, allowing the individual to display existing competencies that support and strengthen new functioning" (pp. 126-130).

I will now briefly describe the function of each of the three phases of the empowerment model. The Confrontation Phase is the first phase of the empowerment process. The purpose of this phase is to use the techniques of critical self-reflection and rational discourse to assist the students in developing an awareness of the sources of power that serve to constrain, restrict, or suppress the development of student power. This phase is also intended to imbue a freedom to criticize and to instigate a resistance oppressive power, that is, that power which has functioned to silence the voice of the student, specifically in decision making concerning his/her own learning process.

The Healing Phase is the second phase of the empowerment model. The purpose of this phase is to assist the focus group, again through the processes of critical reflection and rational discourse, to understand the reasons for their disempowerment and become aware of, unfold, expand and nurture their powers-from-within.

The Demonstrating Phase is the third and final phase. The purpose of this final phase is to provide an opportunity for the focus group, who have now developed power-from-within, to express that empowerment by directing their own learning processes. Mishler (cited in Evans and Nation, 1989) suggests that "to be empowered is not only to speak one's voice and to have one's say but to apply that understanding arrived at to action" (p. 201). Therefore models of learning contracts adapted from those designed by Tough (1971) and Stephenson (1981) will be provided. Appendix C contains a sample self-directed learning contract. Tough and Stephenson claim that an empowered student would be able to (1.) determine his/her own learning needs and learning objectives; (2.) identify subjects, themes, topics, issues to constitute curriculum; (3.) access learning and teaching resources and identify delivery methods and (4.) select methods of course

evaluation. The test of the model's potential to facilitate the process of empowerment will be evidenced in the students' demonstrating or expressing their empowered status by completing self-directed learning contracts.

The product of this study will be a model for student-directed learning: a model which will describe a process to facilitate the development of the student's power-from-within. Self-directed learning and emancipatory or democratic education cannot be achieved in the absence of student empowerment. Giroux (cited in Kreisberg, 1992) would agree. He recommends that "educational institutions [must be metaphors for] democratic sites dedicated to self and social improvement " p. 204).

The Research Problem

The research problem encompasses two areas: the field of adult learning and development and the field of distance education. First of all, I contend that a gap exists between the theories of adult learning and development and the practice of adult education, and secondly, I claim that a gap exists between the theories and the practices of distance education. I will now aim to support these claims.

Incongruency Between Theory and Practice of Andragogy. The theories of adult learning and development indicate that adult learners value autonomy and independence, that they have accumulated rich resources of experience and that they prefer to direct their own learning processes (Brookfield, 1986; Evans, 1994; Freire, 1974; Knowles, 1980; Kolb, 1984). Yet studies reveal that low levels of student-directed learning and high levels of dissatisfaction and attrition

are salient to adult education. The adult learner's learning process is not student directed. Professors continue to make most major decisions concerning the adult learner's learning process. Professors determine course content, decide on the pace and sequence of learning activities, select teaching methodology and determine delivery and evaluation methods.

A teacher-directed practice has produced dependent and passive adult learners. In fact, what has been described by theorists as a learned helplessness, or even a learned hopelessness, has developed as studies reveal that adult learners are unable to take even the first steps in directing their own learning. Statistics reveal that low levels of self-directed learning, and high levels of dissatisfaction and attrition are salient to adult education. This fact might be a strong indication that the adult education system has failed to recognize the adult learners' psychological attributes of autonomy and independence, nor has the system acknowledged that the adult learners possesses competencies and expertise, powers that ought to be nurtured and developed.

If adult self-directed education is to be achieved, these 'powers-from-within' ought to be identified and developed, prior to and in preparation for the self-directed learning process. Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) would agree, they claim emancipatory and democratic education, which they have identified as the goal of education, has not yet been achieved in the practice of adult education.

Incongruency Between Theory and Practice of Distance Education. Research of distance education by Evans and Nation (1989) revealed extremely high attrition rates, sometimes as high as 60%; similarly studies by Slotnick et al (1993) revealed that less than 50% of distance students complete their first distance education course (p. 79). Great concern has been expressed among

distance education administrators to reduce attrition rates. In fact studying for an academic degree through the distance mode is considered a difficult, if not impossible, challenge (Beder & Darkenwald, 1982; Keegan, 1986; Moore 1980; Novak & Gowin, 1989).

Beder, Darkenwald, and Merriam (1982) cite a number of factors contributing to dissatisfaction and attrition in the distance education mode. Some of these are: cost of distance programs, delay in postal delivery or slow feedback on assignments. I recognize that these factors do inhibit both access to and success in distance programs; however I contend that the negative symbols and meanings that have been constructed for the practice of distance education and for the distance education student have disempowered the student and have produced a teacher-directed learning process rather than a student-directed adult education system.

I consider the psychological factor, lack of student empowerment and lack of student voice in decision making concerning the student's own learning process, as causal to low levels of self-directed adult learning. This factor, I contend, is primarily responsible for high levels of dissatisfaction and attrition salient to the distance mode.

One can therefore conclude that the practice of adult distance education is incongruent with the theories of adult learning and development and secondly the theories and practices of distance education are also incongruent. Tinto's Model of Persistence and Withdrawal in Higher Education (cited in Munch, 1994) supports my hypothesis. Tinto cautions:

> ...dropout in the form of voluntary withdrawal appears to relate to lack of congruency between the individual and both the intellectual climate of the institution and the social system. Persistence or withdrawal from academic institutions is dependent on the level of integration the student experiences with the academic system, including both student and faculty social systems of the university.... (p. 284).

As low levels of self-directed learning and high levels of dissatisfaction and attrition are characteristic of adult distance education, it is indeed clear that the goals of emancipatory and democratic education, envisaged by Aronowitz and Giroux, have not been achieved: the practice of adult distance education is something other than the theories intended.

This study will aim to pose a conceptual base and to present a model to facilitate the process of student empowerment and its practice: self-directed learning. I believe that student empowerment, which is evidenced in the adult learners actively directing their own education, is a metaphor for emancipatory and democratic education. Student empowerment is an essential element of adult learning and development and provision of self-directed learning is a professional responsibility of educators of adults.

Significance of the Research

I hope that the conceptions and practical implications resulting from this study will contribute to the body of literature concerned with adult education, student empowerment and the practice of self-directed learning. These areas of study are ones which Caffarella (1988) and Candy (1991) claim have suffered from a dearth of literature. Houle (cited in Garrison, 1992) claims that to date, "adult education has not achieved a masterful synthesis of what can be confidently be said to be the central discipline or the basic knowledge of the field" (p. 8). As well, Stubblefield, Dampiere and Keane (cited in Garrison, 1992) agree that "adult education and distance education have a long history of practice but as the focus of research, they are in their infancies" (p. 1). Yet, despite this fact, research by Fullan (1993) and Slotnick

et al (1993) reveal that adult learners are comprising an ever growing and vital segment of the student population in universities. Plecas and Sork (cited in Garrison, 1992) recommend that research into adult education ought to be conducted in order to provide for development of "a body of disciplined knowledge relating to how learning can best be facilitated given various adult learner populations and various social and political conditions" (p. 8). Houle (cited in Garrison, 1992) states, "It indicates a serious challenge for adult education researchers to consolidate their efforts in the goal of developing distinctive and coherent theoretical frameworks and thus establishing the credibility of adult education as a field of study" (p. 8)

Many theorists would agree that self-directed learning is the eventual goal of adult education, in fact Candy (1991) describes the concept as reaching a trend. However, much research to date has not focussed on the relationship between disempowerment of the adult learner, the process of self-directed learning and the distance education mode of delivery. Many studies to date have focussed on the situational aspects of self-directed learning, for example, self-management skills, the role of the facilitator or environmental or situational factors. Other researchers have focussed on the relationship between the constructs of negative self-concepts and the rate of progress in self-directed learning (Brockett, 1983); the relationship between self-directed learning and its effect on self-concept (Sabbaghian ,1980); the constructs of field dependency and independent learning (Theil and Tzuk, 1985).

My study seeks to focus on adult distance learning based on *the actual experiences of the learner*. This study aims to explore how the adult experiences his or her own learning process through the distance mode of delivery.The study will synthesize three concepts which

are distinctive of the adult learners' experiences: the psychological attribute of adult learner independence, the practice of self-directed learning and the delivery method of distance education.

Significance of the Research Methodology: The Empowerment Model.

Student autonomy and student-directed learning have not been studied by others in exactly the way this study intends, that is, using the research design of focus group learning and project and the model's components, critical reflection and rational discourse. Other researchers have studied development of autonomy of teachers and citizen activists using dialogic introspection and intervention models but not with distance education graduate students. The focus of this study is the graduate student, the adult learner, who, as Kasworm (1983) asserts, holds the greatest potential for self-directedness.

Limitations of the Research

Contingences of time, money and accessibility limit all research. This study as well has limitations. The research sample was restricted to five graduate students at one university, Memorial University of Newfoundland. It would have been beneficial to involve several focus groups from various post secondary educational institutions but this was not a practical option at this time. However, LeCompte and Preissle (1993) assure us that small sample size is characteristic of qualitative research.

The scope of the study involved only the psychological attributes of power; specifically the skills, competencies, and potentialities that reside within the learner. The study did not focus on other factors as intellectual, sociological, economic or physical characteristics of the adult distance learner. Despite these limitations, I believe that the findings of this study can add to the body of literature surrounding the field of adult education and student empowerment.

I hope that the findings of this research will provide an understanding of the relationships between the constructs of power-from-within, self-directed learning and the adult distance learner. I hope that the empowerment model can be applied not only in a distance education setting, but in any setting, in order to achieve a more emancipatory and democratic interaction.

CHAPTER II

Review of Selected Literature

In this chapter, the literature concerning the constructs of adult education, distance education, self-directed learning and empowerment, as well as the practices of critical reflection and rational discourse, which are components of the empowerment model, will be reviewed. In this chapter, I intend to review the links between the construct of adult learning and development, the distance mode of educational delivery, the practice of self-directed learning and adult learner empowerment.

<u>Adult Education</u>

Adulthood is defined as a time of freedom from the influence of others, a time when individuals direct their own actions and assume responsibility for them (Strong, 1977). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970) describes adulthood as a phase during which the adult strives to reach full development of his/her capabilities. Humanistic philosophy as well, assumes that individuals possess an urge toward personal growth and toward the goal of self-actualization and that individuals wish to assume responsibility for their learning, growth and development. Owens (1995) offers his support when he claims that professionals are motivated by satisfaction of intrinsic needs of "achievement, recognition, and advancement...forces which are valuable to individuals to lift their performance and to approach their maximum potential" (p. 117). In summary, the need for self-actualization, or maximization of personal potential, is characteristic of the adulthood phase of human development.

Adult Learners. Adult learners are best defined by distinguishing them from younger learners. The self-concept of the adult learner is characterized by independence, autonomy and self-direction; whereas, the self-concept of the child is characterized by dependence (Brockett & Heimstra, 1991). The younger learner is often a passive learner who is dependent upon a teacher to design, develop, implement and evaluate the learning process for him or her. In contrast, the independent adult learner is able to become actively involved in designing, developing, implementing and evaluating the learning process for himself or herself. Knowles Theory of Adult Learning (cited in Mugridge & Kaufman, 1986)) states that, " adult learners, when opportunities arise for relevant learning can and do demonstrate very high levels of .... autonomy, and independence" (p. 165). Adults are more likely to strive for certain levels of involvement.

Two constructs associated with the study of adult learning and development are andragogy and conscientization.

Andragogy. Knowles (1980) used the term andragogy to define a learning process characteristic of adulthood. Assumptions of andragogy include the following: adult learners need to direct and control things which affect their lives, adults need to learn things which are relevant to them and experience is a valuable source of learning (Usher & Bryant, 1989). Kolb (1984), recognized for his study on experiential learning, summarizes, "Knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38), that is adults are informed or acquire knowledge through work and life experiences.

Conscientization.. This construct similarly describes the field of study concerned with adult learning and development. *Conscientizacao* represents " the *development* of the awakening of critical awareness" (Freire 1974, p. 19, original emphasis). Taylor (1993) adds that

"Conscientization is a process of developing consciousness, but consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform" (p. 52). Essential components of conscientization are reflection and rational discourse (Freire, 1974; Taylor, 1993). Kolb (1984) states that "Through reflection, learners become aware that beliefs and structures are not fixed and rigid and should be open to continuous questioning and re-vision. Through rational discourse learners acquire exposure to different ways of looking at the world " (p. 38). The empowerment model implemented in this study includes both critical reflection and rational discourse to promote developmnet of the powers that reside within the individual.

<u>Distance Education</u>

Distance education, as an alternative mode of educational delivery, was defined by the 1988 XI Latin American Teleducation Conference, as a system based on the use of instructional media that promotes the self-teaching and self-learning process. It provides greater geographic coverage than the traditional on-campus system of education. Succinctly, distance education, by providing flexibility of time and place, facilitates access to and participation in higher education. Previous to the distance mode of delivery, higher education, as it is defined in this study, was available only to those who found it possible to attend a post secondary institution, on-campus and full time. Verduin and Clarke (1991) cite other characteristics of distance education. They claim that the distance delivery mode not only removes barriers to participation in higher education, but they claim that in many instances distance education is learner-centered education, and is thus more effective than the traditional on-campus mode of delivery.

Holmberg (1986) describes distance education as including these following characteristics:

(a) non-contiguous communication
(b) pre-produced courses
(c) two-way communication between student , tutors and others
(d) almost used exclusively by adults
(f) the economics of distance education is strongly influenced by mass education
(g) distance education serves the individual learner
    (p. 141-142).

However, Shale, (cited in Tight, 1996), expresses concerns with distance mode of

delivery. He cautions:

> All of what constitutes the process of education when teachers and students are able to
> meet face-to-face also constitutes the process of education when teachers and student are
> physically separated. All the necessary conditions for the educational process are inherent
> in face-to-face contact. This is not the case when teacher and student are physically apart.
> The task of distance education is to find the means by which to introduce these necessary
> conditions, or to simulate them so closely as to be acceptable proxies (p. 93).

Self-Directed Learning

Moore (1980) describes one who is a self-directed learner as,

> possessing the ability to identify his learning needs when he finds a problem to be solved,
> a skill to be acquired, or information to be obtained. He is able to articulate his need in the
> form of a general goal, differentiate that goal into several specific objectives, and define
> fairly explicitly his criteria for successful achievement. In implementing his need, he
> gathers the information he desires, collects his ideas, practices skills, works to resolve
> problems, and achieves his goals. In evaluating, the learner judges the
> appropriateness of newly acquired skills, the adequacy of his solutions, and the quality of
> his new ideas and knowledge (p. 23).

Brookfield's (1980) definition, as well, emphasises the concept of independence. He uses

the term independent learning to describe the adult's learning process where "decisions about

immediate and terminal learning goals to be pursued, rate of student progress, evaluative

procedures to be employed and sources of material to be consulted are in the hands of the learner"

(p. 3).

Brockett (1983) emphasizes that the concept of responsibility is inextricably interwoven in the concept of self-direction. He defines the process of self-directed learning as one where the primary responsibility for setting learning objectives, determining learning resources, carrying out and evaluating learning activities rests with the learner. In 1991 Brockett and Hiemstra developed a self-directed learning model which can be used to define and to evaluate self-directed learning. The model, termed the Personal Responsibility Orientation Model (PRO Model), includes these components:

1. The learner *assumes personal responsibility* for determining learning needs, purposes, questions, goals

2. The learner *generates a learning contract* between himself/herself and the facilitator in order to build commitment to complete learning initiatives

3. The learner *identifies preferred learning strategies* (for example: mentors, role models, study groups, small group discussions)

4. The learner *determines course components* (for example: identifying and generating annotated bibliographies from the academic literature related to the selected field of interest, conducting small qualitative research studies, conducting critical inquiry of major trends and controversies in the field of study, critically analyzing theories, ideologies, perspectives, conducting comparative research, reading and preparing critical analysis of the literature surrounding the area of study;

5. The learner *participates in decisions* concerning evaluation

Other definitions of self-directed learning are presented by Candy (1991). He identifies four distinct, but related, phenomena of the construct, self-direction. They are as follows:

> "self-direction" as a personal attribute (personal autonomy); "self-direction" as the willingness and capacity to conduct one's own education (self-management); "self-direction" as a mode of organizing instruction in formal settings (learner -control) and "self-direction" as the individual, non-institutional pursuit of learning opportunities in the natural setting (autodidaxy) (p. 23).

In summary, Brockett & Hiemstra (1991), Jarvis (1983, 1987), Merriam and Caffarells (1991) all concur that the mode of learning which is particularly characteristic of adulthood is self-directed learning. Self-directed learning is not only a goal but a foundation for a philosophy of adult education (Ashcroft, 1987; Mezirow, 1990).

Learner-Control. Another concept associated with self-directed learning is learner control. Control over the learning process, Candy (1991) maintains, can be described along a continuum .

> On one end of the continuum would be characterized by teacher indoctrination and teacher control.. an almost total teacher control and little room for learner control at all. Then come in sequence, lectures, lessons .., programmed instruction, ... individualized instruction, ... personalized instruction, ... interactive computer-managed learning, ... discovery learning, and so on, until finally the point is reached where learners have accepted almost all control over valued instructional functions. This point..at the edge of the continuum is called independent study (p. 11).

In this study I will synthesize the constructs of adult learning and development, the process of self-directed learning and the delivery mode of distance education. Other researchers have linked these constructs. For example, Candy (1991), Knowles (1980), and Lewis and Spencer (1986) all claim that independence and autonomy is a critical element of both adult

education and distance education. In this quote Garrison (1989) connects the concept of adult education or andragogy, the process of self-directed learning and the mode of distance education. He states, "Adult educators must recognize the ability of telecommunications and microprocessor technology to assist adult educators to reach out to adult learners in a variety of settings; and we must bridge the gap between formal institutional education and activities of self-directed learning in the natural societal setting" (p. 136). Moore (cited in Calvert, 1984) avows that self-directedness in the form of autonomy and independence is central to the success of distance education programs and institutions should "adopt positive and involving attitudes, practices and images" (p. 78). He strongly recommends that these alternative modes should reflect a partnership between the student and the academic institution based on the concept that students should participate in researching, designing and developing their own learning processes.

<u>Empowerment</u>

For the purpose of this paper I have identified Starhawk's definition of empowerment as relevant to the discussion of adult learner empowerment and self-directed education. As indicated previously, Starhawk (1987) coined the term 'power-from-within'. She describes it in terms of a sense of being able, or a sense of confidence and power which develops with the identification, unfolding, expansion and development of innate abilities and competencies. " Power-from-within is akin to the sense of mastery we develop as young children with each new unfolding ability" (p. 10). I would equate Starhawk's definition of empowerment to Maslow's definition of self-actualization. He defines self-actualization as the identification, development and exploitation of talents, capacities and potentialities.

<u>Empowerment and Self-Directed Learning</u>. Concepts which are related to empowerment as self-esteem, self-confidence and positive self-identity, are inherent in the construct of self-directed, autonomous or learner-controlled learning. Brockett & Hiemstra (1991) comment, "it can be said with a high degree of confidence that there is a link between self-direction and self-concept... findings indicate that self-direction is reflected in how adults perceive themselves" (p. 98). Sabbaghian (1980) advocates that "Adult students with higher self-concepts appear to be more able to plan and direct the majority of their learning projects themselves than adult students with lower self-concepts" (pp. 114-115). Following that lead, one can deduce that empowered learners hold the greatest potential for self-directed learning.

Cross (1981) claims that unfavourable attitudes and perceptions about oneself as a learner inhibit participation in self-directed learning. For the adult learner, self-esteem is of great importance. In fact social learning theory informs us that adults will not remain involved in a learning activity or remain involved with a group, if affiliation does not contribute to their self-esteem. Many adult learners are very sensitive to criticism and need recognition, approval and praise for their efforts. The message for educators of adults is that a supportive and empowering environment is necessary if learning is to take place (Kreisberg, 1992).

<u>Empowerment and Critical Theory</u>. Critical theory provides a foundation for the study of power. Rosenman (1980) emphasizes the element of critical pedagogy in her definition of empowerment. She states, "Empowerment for an individual means the development and use of mechanisms which allow control over individual and community destinies to be exercised without the oppressive and unjust restraint of others" (p. 252).

Julian Rappaport (cited in Kreisberg, 1992) emphasizes the connection between

empowerment and critical self-reflection. She defines empowerment "as a movement away from a paternalistic notion of helping as a way of addressing individual needs and deficiencies, to a notion of change that focuses on assuring individuals and communities of their rights and responsibilities. This perspective relies on an individuals own capacities to help ourselves and others " (p. 19).

Empowerment is also linked to resistance. According to Kieffer (1981), Rappaport (1981), and Solomon (1976), when one is becoming empowered one develops the confidence and ability to critically reflect on one's social and political situation. The process involves reflecting on, analysing and resisting social identities and interactions which have been identified as unfavourable or disadvantaging.

Kieffer (1981) links empowerment and self-directed learning. He uses the phrase "participatory competence" as synonymous with empowerment. Participatory competence would show individuals developing their awareness and understanding of the reasons for disempowerment and identifying and developing competencies which would be used to enable them to participate effectively in decisions which affect their lives. Kreisberg (1992) emphasizes that empowerment " demands both personal and institutional change...it calls for alternative ways of thinking about ourselves..." (p. 18). He adds that "It is a personal transformation out of silence and submission that is characterized by the development of an authentic voice...and it is a " social process of self assertion in one's world" (p. 19).

Cherryholmes (1988), Doyle (1993) and Popkewitz (1984) expand this idea of assertion. They link empowerment to the expression of individuals' voices, in decisions concerning issues which affect their lives. However Popkewitz cautions that, as the educational system is a socially and culturally constructed system, it is not surprising that it is replete with contradictions.

The Empowerment Model

As cited in the preceding section, the processes of critical reflection and rational discourse are central to empowerment, and empowerment is essential to self-directedness. Critical reflection and inquiry are effective in fostering the development of power-from-within.

According to Freire (1970), Knowles (1980) and Mezirow (1990) the processes of critical reflection and rational discourse develop the individual's self-confidence. They cite that these processes allow learners to discover and validate in themselves what they already know and as well these processes generate insight and new knowledge, knowledge can be used to guide future action.

Schon (1987) explains that "the process of critical reflective inquiry of ones personal biography constitutes both the content and the consequences of reflective thinking and ... it shapes and restructures one's personal knowledge by transforming the individual's understandings of the social, political and economic cultural milieu in which the practice is situated" (p. 31).

In the first phase of this particular empowerment model, the focus group are involved in critical reflection and rational discourse for the purpose of exposing oppressive power which functions to main, constrain , restrict and control the lives of the less powerful.

Oberg (1986) numerates a sequence of steps through which he claims one progresses to attain a level of empowerment.

In the first step the individual focuses on one's experiences, goals, perceptions, purposes and values; secondly the individual attempts to identify and analyze the meanings or the reality which he/she has constructed for these; thirdly the individual aims to identify the underlying assumptions upon which these meanings and constructions have been founded. During the final phase one experiences a transformative process where newly

constructed goals, values, perceptions are explored and expressed in one's professional practice (p. 34).

Oberg (1986) concluded that "in the course of their reflection, they begin to identify specific ways in which their practice might become more educative... more consistent with their beliefs and values and their idea of the educational good" (p. 31).

Critical Reflection and Critical Theory. A relationship exists between critical reflection and the theoretical foundation of this study, critical theory.

Brookfield (1987) suggest that critical reflection enables one to identify and to resist the efforts of holders of power who intend to control or constrain the freedom of the less powerful. He links critical reflection to critical thinking which he describes as occuring "whenever we question why we or our partners behave in certain ways within relationships" (p. 4). The second step of the confrontation phase of the empowerment model, involves the focus group in developing a resistance to oppressive power. Brookfield states that critical reflection engages the individual in identifying, analysing and evaluating a problem, and these processes function to develop an awareness of and resistance to accepting what is presented as rigid, unchallengeable and inevitable. Similarly Kreisberg (1992) suggests that "critical awareness ensures that the individual explores facts and interpretations, examine contradictory facts and interpretations and uncovering their hidden assumptions and biases. Most importantly critical awareness means that rather than submitting to the knowledge of others, the knower actively engages with knowledge while creating new knowledge" (p. 167).

The critical reflective process includes first, an uneasiness to submit to the traditional

sources of power, followed by an effort to substitute new knowledge and finally an effort to translate this new knowledge into action (Freire, 1970, 1974). Kincheloe (1991) claims that critical analysis "negates the cult of the expert in that it exposes and undermines the myth that the dominant culture should determine and direct the learning process of the less powerful (p. 20) . He summarizes "Critical analysis is the celebration of human self-direction...it uncovers those forces which thwart participation " (p. 21).

Brookfield (1987), Foucault (1980), Freire (1970), and Kreisberg (1992) all agree that those who dominate, often strive to constrain or suppress reflection as it might identify how the individual has been constrained, restrained or oppressed. They continue by claimimg that the powerful may fear that reflection may generate, within those who are oppressed, a wish or an intention to be free of domination.

Habermas (1981) states that emancipation is an inherent component of critical reflection. He reasons that reflection serves not only to expose the dominant holders of power, whose aim is to prevent the less powerful from reflecting upon themselves, but also serves to assist the oppressed in reflecting on their own needs, interests, goals as well as reflecting on their own capabilities, talents, strengths. If we accept Starhawk's definition of power-from-within as a process of identifying, infolding and expanding innate powers, then it is clear that critical reflection, empowerment and emancipation are inextricably interwoven.

Rational Discourse

All struggles for power or empowerment emphasize the importance of sharing ideals, communicating, discussing, working together, and developing alliances. Starhawk (1987) states

that the concept of rational discourse is inherent to the process of development of 'power-from-within'. She claims that rational discourse involves "our bonding with other human beings and with the environment" (p. 9). Rational discourse provides the opportunity to connect with or to develop alliances with others who share similar ideas, interpretations and perspectives. It provides opportunities for pooling of insights and for exploring new ways of looking at things. Rational discourse also provided opportunities for generating new questions and developing new understandings.

In a group and through the process of rational discussion, students experience as Kreisberg (1992) claims, "the process of sharing opinions and identifying, selecting, and justifying analyses and choices, students are challenged to speak, to listen and to make decisions. They are encouraged to achieve the balance between assertion and openness so essential to empowerment." (167). Discussions facilitate participation and critical reflection, and in so doing, promote self-discovery and self-assessment. Discussion groups are touted by Knowles (1980) and Brookfield (1986) as extremely effective in enhancing adult learning and developing student empowerment.

Newmann and Wehlage (1993) define rational discourse as higher order thinking. They state that,

> "it requires students to manipulate information and ideas in ways that transform their meaning and implications, such as when students combine facts and ideas in order to synthesize, generalize, explain, hypothesize or arrive at some conclusions or interpretation. Manipulating information and ideas through these processes allows students to solve problems and discover new meanings and understandings" (p. 9).

Foucault (cited in Kreisberg, 1992) identifies another function of rational discourse. He states that "discourse transmits and produces power, it reinforces it, but it also undermines and

exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart"... he continues, discourse can be " a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (p. 101).

Kreisberg further elaborates on the relationship between rational discourse and empowerment. He describes rational discourse as the expression of voice. He states that " voice is an internal process-tied to feelings of self-confidence and self-worth and to the feelings that one has something to say. And it is also an external process-cultivated in a context in which being listened to by others reinforces the internal belief that one has something worthwhile to say" (p. 116). He further expands the concept of development of voice so that it merges with the concept of self-directedness.... "in developing their own voices individuals begin to become authors of their lives, thus voice and action are intimately linked" (p. 116).

The literature presented in this chapter is used to ground, explore, explain, refute or support the findings of this research study which will be presented in Chapter IV, Data Presentation and Analysis.

CHAPTER III

Theoretical Orientations and Methodological Considerations

Theoretical Orientations

I will apply the theoretical orientations of critical theory and symbolic interactionism to frame this discussion of the relationship between disempowerment or absence of adult distance learners' power and low levels of self-directed learning. Harvey's (1990) model is relevant in this study as his model merges method, theory and epistemology to allow the researcher to conduct research of a particular educational practice.

Critical Theory

Critical theory will provide a framework for understanding the problem of disempowerment, that is, where and how the system functions to deny, constrain or suppress the development of power within the adult distance student. This research is concerned with the struggle against the reproduction of power and control of those in authority, and the struggle for the development of the individual's power and control over decisions that affect his or her learning process.

Critical pedagogy, as a particular form of critical theory, is concerned with the dominant sources of political, social, economic, cultural and intellectual power. The educational institution is a holder of these sources of power (Cherryholmes, 1988; Doyle, 1993; Popkewitz, 1984). Critical theorists contend that the action of the dominant holders of

power is to serve and to legitimize their own interests while ignoring, marginalizing or dismissing the interests of the powerless or subordinate. I contend that the educational institution often denies students the right to to have their learning needs expressed and satisfied. Moreover, the imbalance of power suppresses the development of the student's power and the expression of that power, student voice. Freire (1970), in Pedagogy of the Oppressed describes this type of power as oppressive power which "denies people their right to say their word and think their own thoughts" (p. 121). Adult distance learners are not holders of power; they are not members of the dominant, on-campus student body, nor is distance education the dominant method of program delivery. Research conducted by Garrison (1992) revealed that both the areas of adult education and distance education are regarded as the least powerful and the least prestigious fields in the university and that they lack status, research, recognition and promotion. In fact, he discovered that some faculty perceive distance education as holding merely a second rate status. Gore's (1993) studies reveal that institutions fear that the voice of the distance student will dilute or contaminate the standard of education provided by the institution. Consequently, distance students report that they rarely have voice in decisions concerning their learning process, or when voice is permitted it is not until the end of the course, at feedback and evaluation time (Evans & Nation, 1989).

Adult distance learners are aware that the institution favors the dominant, on-campus, undergraduate student population. The learners are aware that the holders of power resist attempts to provide the less powerful with opportunities and experiences which develop voice.

Kreisberg (1992) states that "empowerment is a personal transformation out of silence and submission... it is characterized by the development of an authentic voice" (p.19). Voice is

in contrast to silence: to not speak out, not to be listened to, to be told, to be subordinated, ignored and dismissed. In contrast, voice is described in the language of possibility: to communicate to others what you mean, to speak your mind, to determine your own goals and directions and to be heard by others. In reference to educational practice, empowered learners demonstrate voice in collaborating with the institution in setting learning objectives, in determining what is considered relevant content, in making decisions concerning choice of delivery methods and techniques and in participating in determining evaluation methods. Succinctly, empowered students are able to direct their own learning. In this study, the adult distance learners, in their distance education experiences, are not empowered as they do not participate in decision making concerning their own learning processes.

Brookfield (1986) emphasizes that the struggle against inequality and for democracy in the educational setting, is the goal of self-directed learning. Giroux and McLaren (1984) state that critical theories serve "to empower the powerless and to transform existing social inequities and injustices" (p.192). If control over and responsibility for the learning process is not shared with the student, then this type of interaction will produce a subordinate and dependent student, not an independent and self-directed adult (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993).

The struggle against power of those in authority is central to the assumptions of critical theory and central to the concepts of student empowerment and adult self-directed learning (Kincheloe, 1991). This present study hopes to promote the struggle for student empowerment. Student empowerment must be developed prior to and in preparation for self-directed learning.

Symbolic Interactionism

The theory of symbolic interactionism is also used to inform this study. Blumer (cited in Munch, 1994) describes symbolic interactionisn as a theory of meaning: "the meaning of an object is not inherent or characteristic to that object, rather it is determined by the actor and by others' recognition and acknowledgement of the actors' meaning attribution, which contributes to the continuation of the meaning ascribed to that object" (p. 289). Symbols are defined a things which indicate or convey meanings. The theory poses these assumptions:

Assumption 1: Symbols that distance education institutions hold for distance students, and the symbols that distance students hold of themselves, do not enhance the adult distance learners' self-concepts nor heighten social identity. Similarly, the symbols that the institution holds for distance education, do not enhance the status or standard of the practice of distance education. Assumption 2: Actions of the institution symbolize the meanings they hold of distance education and the distance education student. Munch (1994) explains that "Meanings are formed, interpreted and modified by people through activities and social interactions" (p. 69). Let me discuss these assumptions beginning with the first, the relationship between symbols and self and social identities and the adult distance learner.

Assumption 1: Symbols of the Adult Distance Learner and Symbols of the Practice of Distance Education

Empowerment is intimately linked to self-identity. Feelings of self-worth, self-confidence and sense of efficiency are correlated with feelings of possessing power.

In application to this study, the theory of symbolic interactionism would propose that adult distance learners' low self concepts and social identities are crucial factors which contribute to lack of adult distance learner empowerment and subsequently low levels of self-directed learning.

Yet some of the literature concerning adult distance learners attributes very positive symbols to the identities of these learners. The assumptions of andragogy and humanism state that individuals seek personal growth and wish to assume responsibility for their learning and development. Similarly, Knowles' Theory of Adult Learning (cited in Mugridge and Kaufman, 1986) states that "adult learners, when opportunities arise for relevant learning, can and do demonstrate very high levels of autonomy and independence" (p. 165). According to these philosophies, the identity of many adult learners is not only very positive, but also satisfaction of the adult distance learners' needs for personal growth, self-actualization, self-esteem and empowerment is critically important to them and critically essential to tthe success of their learning process.

On the other hand, research of the literature reveals also that adult distance learners hold very negative self-identities. The literature cites that prior identities and experiences in the lives of distance learners have contributed to the formation of the current symbols and low self-identities distance students hold as learners. In some studies distance students reveal that missed educational opportunities, or overwhelming family responsibilities and high levels of anxiety were responsible for low academic achievement. Dropping back in to university is often a response to repair the injustices or the inequities of opportunity endured in previous academic experiences. Learners feel that, through the mode of adult distance education, they

will have the opportunity to generate more positive symbols to attribute to their self-identities (Evans & Nation, 1989).

I believe that the symbols the adult distance learner holds of himself or herself reflect one who is not a knowledge expert and not a person of equal status in interactions with the professors. As well I believe that the institution perceives the adult distance student as a non-member of the dominant on-campus undergraduate student population. Based on these assumptions, it is not surprising that low self and social identities are attributions of adult distance learners. Therefore it may be expected that lack of student power and low levels of self-directed learning would be salient to the adult distance education process.

Symbols of the Practice of Distance Education

This section will be concerned with symbols of the practice of distance education. Many institutions have not constructed very positive meanings for the practice of distance education. The term distance education or off-campus education connotes remoteness, marginality and isolation. According to Fitzclarence and Kemm (cited in Penz and Neil, 1981), the distance mode of delivery separates learners from not only the academic institution including its libraries and student programs and service organizations, but distance education isolates learners from professors and other students who can support and enhance the learners' learning process. Despite the use of modern computer technology, this study argues that the distance mode of delivery continues to restrict social interaction between student and those who have the potential to contribute to his or her learning.

Smith's studies (cited in Gore, 1993) prove to be very damning; he reports that "to

some, who espouse traditional approaches, the term distance education is a contradiction in terms" (p. 70). As the symbols held for the practice of distance education suggest an inferior or second rate standard of education in comparison to the on-campus traditional mode of educational delivery.

<u>Assumption 2: Social Interactions Express Symbols and Identities</u>

Let us now discuss how the actions of the distance institutions symbolize the meanings that they hold of distance education and of the distance education learner.

Social interactions reveal that the symbols held for the practice of distance education are low and negative. Many academic institutions treat their distance education programs as marginal to their mandates. For example, it is not uncommon for distance education programs to be offered through a limited selection of short programs in continuing education and extension services of institutions and in graduate studies programs. Pederson and Fleming (cited in Gore, 1993) emphasize that most often "the study of distance education is perceived by faculty as an area of endeavour which is second rate"(p. 69).

However opposing points of view are expressed by Silver (1990). He argues that distance techniques and technologies are usually used at all levels from adult basic education to post graduate study by a variety of institution types and reputations and that the meaning attribution of low status or marginal status is unfounded (cited in Gore, 1993).

However, despite the claims that modern distance technology makes, I feel that the practice of adult distance education does not facilitate development of student empowerment, and consequently, does not promote adult self-directed education. I argue that the symbols and

meanings that institutions have constructed for the delivery mode of distance education, as well as the individual and social identities that have been constructed for distance education students have created an imbalance of power. In social interactions between the professor and the adult distance learner, power and esteem are tipped in favor of the professor and the institution and away from the student. As a result, the symbols ascribed to the adult distance learners have prescribed interactions that have disadvantaged the learners. For example, social interactions have prescribed a teacher-directed not a student -directed learning process. It is the professor who assesses the student's educational needs and it is the professor who prescribes and dispenses what is appropriate information. Taifel (cited in Munch, 1994) warns that an individual will not remain a member of a group, and will seek membership in another group, if affiliation or membership does not contribute to his/her positive self identity and self-esteem. He warns that distance education students will simply leave educational situations that do not treat them as valued, independent adults wish to be treated.

In this research study, critical theory and the theory of symbolic interactionism will be used to help examine my contention that developing the student's 'power-from-within' or in other words unfolding and expanding positive self and social identities would define student empowerment. An empowered student would be able to direct his/her own learning process. The development of the student's power-from-within, which would be expressed in student-directed learning, is critical to adult distance education and central to this research.

Methodological Considerations

Introduction

Building on the previous theoretical orientations, a qualitative ethnographic research design was chosen to conduct this study of adult learner empowerment and the practice of self-directed learning and the distance mode of delivery. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) recommend that qualitative research methods be used in research studies which are concerned with such complex issues as learning or educational initiatives in post secondary environments. Similarly Keiffer (1981) contends that as "empowerment is an interactive and highly subjective relationship of individuals and their environment,... it demands innovation in qualitative ethnographic methodology.. a special strategy to capture the intense experience of human struggle and transformation" (p. 15). Following these recommendations, I have identified qualitative research methodology as appropriate to this study of adult learner empowerment and self-directed learning.

The Research Design

The research design of this study includes the following qualitative data collection techniques: (1.) participant observation, (2.) preliminary questionnaire , (3.) research of related literature, (4.) focus group learning and project, (5.) document analysis. Mathison (cited in Garrison, 1988) contends that "Good research practice obligates the researcher to triangulate, that is to use multiple methods, data sources and researchers to enhance the validity of the

research findings" (p. 13). Dunaway and Baum (1984), Hay (1986) and Thompson (1988) (cited in Marshall and Rossman, 1989) advise that using merely interview techniques may present problems of reliability and validity. LeCompte & Preissle (1993) inform us that the use of multiple data collection strategies ensures reliability and validity of research results as the weakness of one method is compensated for by the other techniques. I will now describe each data collection technique used in this study.

<u>Participant Observation</u>

During the 1997 Winter semester at Memorial University, while taking a course through the distance delivery mode, I assumed the role of participant-observer. I involved the graduate students and professors in the Faculty of Education at this university in this research study. As I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education, Post secondary Leadership Speciality, I had easy access to the research site and to the research sample. Opportunities for frequent contact with professors who taught graduate-level courses through distance education, and contact with graduate students who studied through distance education, were not problematic. During that time I recorded observations and communications between myself and the professors and between myself and other students in the course.

The data collection technique of participant observation contributed to informing me of the theoretical foundations of the study and as well as contributed to identifying other data collection techniques, as focus group learning and project and document analysis, as appropriate to this research.

The Confirmation Questionnaire

To assure comparability, reliability and validity, an atypical sample of distance education students was selected from the sampling universe of all graduate candidates taking courses towards the degree of master of education, Post Secondary and Leadership specialities. This atypical sample of students was identified as they are familiar with the body of literature surrounding the issues which are critical to this study: andragogy, self-directed learning and distance education. Potential for success would be highest with this sample. Kasworm (1983) supports my choice of research sample. Her studies revealed that potential for self-directed learning is greatest among adult learners studying in post secondary educational institutions.

To identify the research sample, I met with the co-ordinator of the master of education post secondary speciality to request permission to use her class list to contact the students in this program. I contacted the students through electronic mail. The communication contained a letter which introduced me as a master of education candidate, described the nature and purpose of my study, contained an outline of the focus group activities, defined the role participants would play in the research and requested the student's participation. Appendix A contains this correspondence.

In addition, the electronic mail message contained a confirmation questionnaire. This short questionnaire was adapted from the Confidence Scale developed by Harry Stanton and described in his article entitled "Independent Study: A Matter of Confidence" in David Boud's (1981) book Developing Student Autonomy in Learning. Those who wished to be participants in the research, indicated their intent by completing the questionnaire and returning it, along with the letter of informed consent, via electronic mail or by delivery to my office in the university. The

questionnaire asked the students to rate their level of interest in student-directed learning; to rate

their level of interest in learning through the distance education mode of delivery; and to rate the

level of self-confidence that they hold in their abilities as students on a scale of 1(low) to 10

(high). Appendix B contains the confirmation questionnaire.

Those questionnaires which when analysed, identified individuals who (a.) indicated a high

level of interest in self-directed learning and (b.) indicated a low level of satisfaction in the

distance education process, were identified as the research sample: the focus group. This group

participated in the focus group learning and project component of the data collection process.

Each member of the focus group had obtained a baccalaureate degrees: three graduated in

the faculty of arts, one in the faculty of nursing and one in the faculty of social work. Two held

degrees in both in the arts and in the education faculties and these individuals had also taught

courses at the post-secondary level through distance mode of delivery. Two members were full

time students and three were part-time students.

The Empowering Model: Focus Group Learning and Project

I designed the model to facilitate empowerment of the student, that is, to facilitate

development and expansion of what Starhawk terms power-from-within. I hoped that from this

process would emerge an empowered student; a student who would be able to design and direct

his/her own learning process.

The design of this model is based on Kieffer's 1981 design model, dialogic retrospection.

This model involved him in requesting ten civic activists to review transcripts, then interviewing

them concerning their experiences in developing, what he termed, "participatory competence", a

concept similar to collaborative learning. The model used in this present study will also require the focus group to review transcripts, then to reflect on academic experiences and finally to come to group interviews prepared to discuss their opinions concerning the concept of empowerment, the delivery mode of distance education and the practice of self-directed learning.

<u>Essential Components of the Empowerment Model</u>.

This model involved the focus group in three main activities: learning, critical reflection and rational discourse. Alexander and Judy (1988) and Mugridge and Kaufman (1986) state that learners, who undergo the empowerment process, need competence in certain activities, skills or mechanism which would serve as tools in this process. Candy (1991) agrees when he states that "learner autonomy must be developed through deliberate exposure to certain educational and social experiences" (p. 299).

This model intends to provide the tools of knowledge through textual readings, as well as opportunities to learn and to exercise the skills of critical reflection and rational discourse. Each one of these components will now be described.

<u>Knowledge.</u> I provided the focus group with readings on the theory and application of critical reflection and rational discourse. Knowledge of and expertise in these skills would contribute to the learner's ability to participate in discussions with other students and with the institution, in sharing ideas, exploring issues, confronting and solving problems and making decisions concerning the learning process. In sum, acquisition of knowledge would support the learners' struggle for control and direction over their own learning.

In addition, I developed papers on critical theory and symbolic interactionism, the theories

which frame this study. In generating the paper concerning critical theory, I drew primarily on the works of Gibson, Giroux and McLaren, Kanpol, Kincheloe and Popkewitz. In generating the paper on symbolic interactionism, I drew primarily on the works of Blumer, Denzin and Habermas.

I provided the focus group with readings concerning adult education, empowerment, self-directed learning, as well as case studies of self-directed learning initiatives. The following is a list of some of these articles : A Critical Definition of Adult Education by S. Brookfield; Critical Thinking and Self-Directed Learning in Adult Education: An Analysis of Responsibility and Control Issues by D. R. Garrison; Self-Directed Learning, by R. Caffarella; Meaningful and Meaningless Experience: Towards and Analysis of Learning From Life by P. Jarvis; Unrestraining Liberty: Adult Education and the Empowerment of Persons by S. Stanage.

I also provided the following articles from Developing Student Autonomy by D. Boud: Student Planned Learning by J. Stephenson; Toward Student Responsibility for Learning by D. Boud; Independent Study : A Matter of Confidence by H. Stanton; Student Autonomy in Learning Medicine: Some Participants' Experiences by B. Ferrier, M. Narrin, and J. Seidman. Case studies from Tough's book The Adults' Learning Projects : A Fresh Approach to Theory and Practice in Adult Learning were provided as well.

I am aware that my biases are evident in determining that these topics are central to empowerment and collaborative learning; however, Patton (1990) informs us that "in qualitative studies, the researcher's insights, ideas and impressions can become part of the data of the study and inform the process of data collection" (p. 242).

Critical Reflection and Rational Discourse. These processes were selected as essential

components of the empowerment model. Kreisberg (1992) would support my choice. He contends that the empowerment process must "provide opportunities for dialogue and rational discourse, problem solving and decision making, where learners feel supported to demonstrate these competencies and gain mastery and control over their own lives" (p.172).

Critical theory, a theoretical foundation of this study, also supports the use of critical reflection and rational discourse. Cherryholmes (1988), Doyle (1993), Freire (1974), Kincheloe (1991), and Popkewitz (1987) all concur that critical theory and critical reflection have the potential to link reason to freedom and equality and to link oppression to that which is illogical .

To promote the process of critical reflection and rational discourse, a list of twenty guiding questions was generated and provided with each set of readings. Appendix B contains a list of these questions.

The focus group was requested to read the transcripts and to use the questions to guide reflection on the issues presented in the transcripts and to guide reflection of their own personal experiences related to the issues. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) claim the benefit of reflection on life histories, as a research technique. They claim that data revealed through self-reflection can be used to inform researchers how individuals construct self-identities. Since the constructs of empowerment and self-identities are interwoven, the process of critical self-reflection was selected as a component of the focus group learning and project data collection technique.

Following the activities of reading of the textual materials and critical reflection, the focus group was requested to come to the discussion sessions prepared to share their responses to the questions and to engage in rational discourse.

Implementation of the Model

The focus group learning and project was carried out in the spring of 1997. There were alternating weeks of reflection- and-reading and rational discourse over a six week period. During one week the focus group would be asked to study the transcripts, to reflect on their experiences in relation to the readings and to generate responses to the guiding questions. The following week, the focus group would meet for a 2 hour discussion session to share in rational discourse, their reflections and their responses. The cycle of one week of individual study- and-reflection followed by one week of group discussion, was repeated over a six week period. The focus group sessions were held in a seminar room at Memorial University. All sessions were audio-taped, all data was transcribed verbatim, and stored on a computer disc. The data was entered into Ethnograph, a data storage and retrieval computer research software package and then analysed.

The empowerment model consisted of three phases: (1.) The Confrontation Phase, (2.) The Healing Phase, (3.) The Demonstrating Phase. Each of these phases will be discussed briefly. A more comprehensive discussion will be presented in Chapter 1V: Data Presentation and Analysis.

Session 1 : The Confrontation Phase:

One week prior to the first focus group discussion session, the members were given transcripts on the theories and practice of critical theory and symbolic interactionism as well as transcripts on the theory and practice of critical reflection and rational discourse. A list of guiding questions was also provided.

The focus group was asked to read, reflect on, and problematize the issues presented in the transcripts. They were required to come to the sessions prepared to share, in discussions, their responses to questions. At the sessions, in non-scheduled standardized interviews, the focus group was involved in discussions of critical theory, oppressive power and disempowerment and disempowering and empowering social interactions.

It was intended that through the activities of learning, critical reflection and rational discourse, that the knowledge acquired of the critical theory and its practice, would develop an awareness of the presence and the effect of oppressive power. In this phase it was hoped that the focus group would experience feelings of resistance to oppressive power, as it is this type of power which suppresses the development of the student's 'power-from-within'.

Session 2: The Healing Phase

One week prior to the second session, the focus group was given transcripts on readings concerning theories, concepts and perspectives related to empowerment, adult learning and development as well as case studies of self- directed learning initiatives carried out at post-secondary institution. The focus group members were asked to read these transcripts and use the techniques of critical reflection to analyse the readings. The group would use the guiding questions to identify and explore personal competencies, strengths and areas of knowledge and expertise. Identification, unfolding and expansion of the student's power-from-within would hopefully enhance self-esteem. Psychotherapists inform us that if an individual's perceptions can be modified then it is highly likely that his/her behaviour will be altered accordingly (Bandura, 1977). A student who had developed power-from-within would hopefully express that ableness

through the practice of self-directed learning. Again the focus group came to the sessions prepared to share their reflections and to participate in discussions.

<div align="center">Session 3: Demonstrating Empowerment</div>

The purpose of the final session was to enable the students who had now developed the powers that reside within, to display that competency. Mishler (cited in Evans and Nation, 1989) contends that "to be empowered is not only to speak one's voice and to have one's say but to apply that 'understanding' arrived at to action" (p. 201). During this session, the focus group was asked to demonstrate that they had developed power-from-within by designing their own learning contracts. The focus group was provided with form contracts adapted from learning contracts designed by Tough (1970) and Stephenson (1981). Appendix C contains a sample self-directed learning contract.

Document Analysis

The learning contracts which were generated during the final phase of the focus group and learning project. The learning contracts were analysed to identify whether the focus group demonstrated, by completing the contracts appropriately, that they could improve their ability to direct their own learning. If the focus group had developed 'power-from-within' then they would be able to determine their own learning needs; to set their own learning objectives, to determine course content; to identify learning resources and delivery methods and to select evaluation techniques (Stephenson, 1981; Tough, 1971). The ability to generate a self-directed learning contract would be considered evidence of development of the learner's power-from-

within and an affirmation of the research model's potential, in these specific areas, to facilitate the empowerment process.

For this research, the data collection techniques of review of the literature, participant observation, focus group learning and project and document analysis, comprehensively addressed my research needs. Although each technique was effective, the technique of focus group learning and project provided the most insightful findings. All focus group members enthusiastically embraced the opportunity provided to share their personal reflections and perceptions. I attribute this enthusiasm partially to the fact that all the participants knew each other at the beginning of the sessions, and later in the process, became friends. This factor contributed to the development of trust and openess that was necessary for sharing personal reflections and perceptions which in turn yielded a wealth of data concerning their experiences of their learning processes.

CHAPTER IV

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data collection techniques selected for this research study included (1.) participant observation, (2.) research of the literature and (3.) focus group learning and project.

Research of the Literature

Preliminary collection of data for this study was begun in the winter of 1996 at Memorial University of Newfoundland. For this study, research of the literature was conducted concerning the concepts of empowerment, self-directed learning, adult learning and development, as well as a study of qualitative research methodology.

Participant Observation Data Presentation

In the winter semester of 1997, I took a graduate level course at Memorial University through the distance education mode of delivery and thus began the data collection technique of participant observation. This data collection technique revealed these following broad parameters of the study: (1.) the major issues central to the study of adult education, distance education and empowerment, and (2.) the theoretical foundations, critical theory and symbolic interactionism.

Through the technique of participant observation, I recognized that critical theory would provide the foundation for the research. In addition I recognized the

presence of oppressive power in the distance education system. I identified that oppressive power is often causal to high levels of students' dissatisfaction with the distance mode of delivery, low levels of student power and low levels of self-directed learning. Statistics reveal that these conditions are not at all uncommon to most graduate and distance programs in many postsecondary educational institutions.

Through the technique of participant observation, I identified that the theory of symbolic interactionism would also provide a framework for discussion of symbols, meaning and interactions associated with the practice of adult distance education. The use of the theory of symbolic interactionism would support my hypothesis that symbols of low social identities, which are often ascribed to the adult distance student population, are responsible in part, for teacher-directed rather than student-directed social interactions between the adult distance learner and the institution.

Focus Group Learning and Project: Data Presentation and Analysis

In the spring of 1997, I implemented the focus group learning and project component of the data collection process. The focus group learning and project data collection technique provided the research with interesting findings. I implemented an intervention model, designed to facilitate the process of student empowerment, to a focus group of five graduate distance education students. I selected the processes of critical reflection and rational discourse, which I considered essential components to

empowerment, to constitute part of the model. As well, the focus group would be engaged in reading and analyzing textual material, in reflecting on their academic experiences, and in sharing these perspectives participating in discussion sessions. Textual materials, described in Chapter 111: Theoretical Orientations and Methodological Considerations, included articles concerning the processes and practices of critical reflection and rational discourse and readings on critical theory and the theory of symbolic interactionism. In addition, position papers concerning the theories and practices of andragogy and empowerment and case studies concerning self-directed learning initiatives carried out at other post secondary institutions were also provided.

Implementation of the Empowerment Model. Implementation of the empowering model included three phases: (1.) The Confrontation Phase, (2.) The Healing Phase and (3.) The Demonstrating Phase. The following diagram can be used to guide the reader through the phases of the empowerment model; a description of each of the phases will follow.

GUIDING MODEL FOR DEVELOPING POWER-FROM-WITHIN

PHASE1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3
Confrontation Phase	Healing Phase	Demonstrating Empowerment

Step1:
    Developing Awareness
    of Freedom
    to Criticize
	Step 1:
	    Understanding Reasons
	    for Disempowerment
		Step 1:
		    Expressing Development
		    of Power-From-Within

Step 2:
    Resistance to
    Oppresive Power
	Step 2:
	    Identifying, Unfolding
	    and Expanding
	    Power-From-Within
		Step 2:
		    Generating
		    Self-Directed Learning
		    Contracts

Part 1 of the Empowerment Process: The Confrontation Phase

Developing Awareness of and Freedom to Criticize Oppressive Power

The confrontation phase consisted of two steps. During the first step, the focus group

developed an awareness of the presence of oppressive power along with a sense of freedom to

criticize that power. During the second step the focus group developed a resistance to

oppressive power, that is, resistance to power which suppresses development of the power that

resides within the student. These steps will now be described.

Step 1: Awareness of and Freedom To Criticize Oppressive Power.

During this first step of the empowerment process, the focus group was given reading on the theories and practices of critical theory and symbolic interactionism. They were given guiding questions based on the readings and were requested to come to the discussion sessions prepared to share their reflections and their responses to the questions.

The following questions, which I identified as central to the discussion of critical theory and to its impact on empowerment of the adult distance learner and to the practice of self-directed learning, were posed during this first step of the confrontation phase. The focus group demonstrated that they were aware of, and prepared to expose, those who held the greatest share of power in the education system. In the process of rational discourse they provided these responses to the question:

Question: Who holds power and who exerts control over the education process, that is whose needs and interests are served?

"The institution determines entrance requirements, sets academic standards, sets goals and objectives for the course, structures the course, determines teaching and learning methodologies".

"The student may be included in the decision making concerning very, very minor decisions . For example, if the professor wishes, he or she may suggest topics for research papers, then the student has power to make decisions but only from among these options".

The group indicated that other student factions, such as undergraduate students and on-campus students, did hold some power. This factor was revealed in this student's reflection of her on-campus experiences:

"From my experience as an on-campus student, I felt that I had the right to have input, to change or revise the course. It was common for assignments to be modified or for even examinations to be cancelled all together because of face-to-face, in-class student-professor negotiation. In fact new course goals and objectives were sometimes set by students in the classroom".

Through the processes of critical reflection and rational discourse the focus group pooled their knowledge concerning their reflections and academic experiences. As a result, they generated the conclusion that adult distance students hold very little power over decisions concerning their own learning processes. They, as a group, affirmed that it is the educational institution which makes most major decisions concerning the learning process. It is therefore the institution which holds most power over the adult distance learner's learning process and in comparison, the adult distance learner holds very little power.

The awareness of this imbalance of power, generated through critical reflection and rational discourse, agrees with the literature. Studies by Candy (1991), Fullan (1993), Garrison (1989), and Pentz and Neil (1981) establish the fact that adult distance students are not members of the dominant, undergraduate student body, nor is distance education is the dominant method of program delivery. Because of these factors, it is indicated that adult distance students may be one of the most disempowered groups in the university.

<u>Analysis of the Empowerment Process</u>

<u>The Confrontation Phase Step 1: Freedom to Criticize Oppressive Power</u>

This step was characterized by a sense of what I describe as 'permission to criticize' traditional sources or holders of power. The reading, reflections and discussions turned the attention of the focus group toward those who hold power. The focus group realized that the university holds a great deal of power yet has not shared power with those who have very little power. In fact, the group identified that the powerful have succeeded in suppressing or restricting the development of the students' powers. Friere (1974) in his description of conscientizacao, which I have presented in the literature review, describes this step as one in which the oppressed are awakened to the fact they have been disempowered. Kieffer (1981), Kreisberg (1992), and Rappaport (1981) all concur that developing a critical awareness of structures that serve to disempower is the first step leading to empowerment of those who are oppressed.

The empowerment model at this stage was effective. I perceived that the reading of textual materials provided the focus group with the knowledge they needed to be able to identify the presence and practice of oppressive power. Similarly the processes of critical reflection and rational discourse provided the focus group with the tools and the opportunity to explore, question, analyse and evaluate oppressive power. Schon (1987) would support my perspective, he is emphatic in his claim that critical reflection "shapes and restructures personal knowledge... develops understanding of the social, political and economic milieu" (p. 31).

Step 2: Resistance to Oppressive Power.

      In this second step of the confrontation phase the group developed a resistance to traditional ways of doing things, or rules of the game established by those who hold power. Kincheloe (1991) proposes that critical reflection and analysis "negates the cult of the expert in that it exposes and undermines the myth that the dominant culture should determine and direct the learning process of the less powerful" (p. 20).

      These quotes, provided by the focus group, in response to the following questions, are characterized by an uneasiness or a tension and subsequently, by a resistance to the holders of oppressive power.

Question: What are the needs and interests of the distance education student; have these needs and interests been served ?

      "I feel, and learning theorists state this too, that discussions are extremely important at the graduate level...discussions set the checks and balances for your own opinions compared with the opinions of others in the class; unfortunately discussions are most often absent from graduate distance education.."

      "I agree, I feel that communication, mentoring, student-to-student interaction: all these describe quality education. However the university fails to provide these things, even though the technology is in place....social interaction is minimal through the distance mode".

      A recurring theme is evident here: despite the modern technology that is used in distance education delivery, distance learners continue to argue that their needs for interaction,

discussion and input in the educational process is severely limited. Another focus group

member added her voice to the complaint.

"I agree with you ... I know what I need ...I need social interaction... discussions.. just talking with people. I just don't get the maximum benefit or reach my potential without contact. I don't like not having contact. I am a learner who needs to be face-to face, hands on, visual, concrete".

The element of resistance to oppressive power, as power, which is not sacred and

infallible, but power which denies individuals their rights, is again evident in this response.

"I have a right to have input in the more important decisions concerning my life, including my own learning process.... I have the right and also the responsibility to participate. Students should participate to ensure that there is a correlation between learning needs and the course content; or to ensure that the teaching-learning methodology suggested for the course were ones that which best promoted learning".

A feeling of resistance to oppressive power was also generated concerning the issue of

professional identity. Members reported that it was very disconcerting to discover that their

previous academic experiences and professional workplace experiences were ignored and

devalued. They described themselves as mid-career professionals who had much to contribute.

For example, one focus group member described an academic experience where her

professional expertise was acknowledged by the professor and subsequently contributed to the

learning process of the other adult learners as well as the professor himself. She stated that, for

her, it was a very positive and empowering experience. She said:

"Professors often don't realize how much we have to offer..professors can learn from adult learners as well. For example, one course I did, I told the class that my biggest professional challenge was teaching in a multigrade classroom where there was only a one child in the kindergarten class. The professor was very comfortable with the fact that he had never shared this experience. My perspectives on many topics covered in that course, enlightened him and the other students too . ..it also prepared him for papers and assignments which I would submit.The professor did not feel that he had to be the expert all the time ..this professor had confidence in me; he realized that at times students are experts too... when this is acknowledged and permitted, it develops the student's power".

From analysis of this data, there is little doubt that, for the focus group, social interaction between student and professor and among students was critical to graduate study. Learning theories propose that social interaction and in the form of critical thinking and discussion is necessary to effective learning. Giroux (1988), Kincheloe (1991), Mugridge & Kaufman (1986), and Schon (1987) conclude that through critical inquiry and discussion, learners have an opportunity to share ideas, knowledge and opinions and to expand their understanding of issues. Similarly, studies by Friere (1974), Brookfield (1986), Knowles (1980) and Kreisberg (1992), in support of the focus group's contention, concur that small group discussions enhance learning as they facilitate self-assessment and self-discovery. However in comparison, the group expressed concerns that although social interaction, reflection and discussion were an integral part of on-campus study, unfortunately, these were absent from graduate distance study. Shale (1990) supports these arguments; he warns that all components which are essential to learning should be components of distance education.

According to the findings of this research, the distance education institution fails in its responsibility to support the students' learning processes. The participants in this focus group would certainly agree.

In addition, although professional work experience is rarely valued by professors, the focus group argued that it informs and contributes to their learning process and it should be acknowledged as doing such. The literature on experiential learning presented by Kolb (1984) supports the data. Kolb's studies reveal that knowledge is created from prior life and work experiences and that for the adult learner, experience is an important source of generating knowledge.

<u>Analysis of the Empowerment Process</u>

<u>Step 2:: Resistance to Oppressive Power</u>

The focus group reflected with the purpose of determining whether their learning needs had been well served by the institution, which was the principal holder of power. Mezirow (1990) maintains that "Central to adult learning, rather than elaborating established meaning schemes, is the process of reflecting back on prior learning to determine whether what we have learned is justified under present circumstances. This is a crucial learning process egregiously ignored by learning theorists" (p. 4).

The focus group, through the processes of critical reflection and rational discourse, determined that their learning needs had not been satisfied; also they were uneasy with the fact that the needs of the power holders were almost continually met. Added to this, they felt insulted that the institution did not share their worries concerning the quality of education which the distance mode of delivery provided.

Resistance to oppressive power was again evident as the group questioned the right and the responsibility of the institution to make decisions concerning their learning, for them. Rappaport's (1981) defines empowerment as a movement toward identifying one's own needs and deficiencies and as a movement toward demanding one's rights and responsibilities. The necessity to resolve the problem related to oppressive power and to dissipate the tension, which characterized this stage, was a right and a responsibility that they felt they should assume.

When a resolution is called for as in this situation, Mezirow (1990) advises that "in order to determine which interpretation is valid and justifiable we can do one of two things: we can test the interpretation against an official standard or authority on the issue or we can through the process of rational discourse decide by consensus" (p. 10). He continues, "our greatest assurance of objectivity comes from exposing an expressed idea to rational and reflective discourse" (p. 10). Habermas (1984) agrees with Mezirow, he opines that "rational discourse involves an analysis and evaluation of the perspectives of both conflicting groups. Through this reflection, analysis and evaluation, a decision is arrived at as to which perception is appropriate and which perspective is unacceptable and illogical" (p. 276).

In application to this present study, it was evident that the problematic situation, would require the focus group to engage in analysis and discussion in hope of arriving at a resolution. The focus group deliberated and concluded that the adult distance learners' learning process has been constrained. The distance education process did not support the adult distance learners' learning processes as it did not provide the ingredients essential to a quality education. They felt that their resistance to authority and their accusations were indeed justified and that the interpretation held by the institution was not a valid one.

In addition, at this stage, individuals realized that personal concerns and perceptions were shared, tested and supported by the other members of the focus group. Feelings, such as these which engender confidence, self-esteem and worth are claimed to be correlated with empowerment. I thus concluded that the processes of critical reflection and rational discourse served to nurture development of the focus group's powers-from-within.

A Discovery: The Presence of Power which Poisons the Root

Further analysis of the data revealed the following information. The focus group, through the tools of reflection and discussion, discovered new knowledge. They uncovered a new strain of oppressive power. Kreisberg (1992) would support the effectiveness of these processes to create new knowledge. He claims that " As the individual is involved in exploring facts and interpretations, examining contradictory perspectives, questioning assumptions"..., the process may involve, .. "generating new knowledge, knowledge of a unique strain of oppressive power" (p. 167). A new strain of power, which I labelled power which poisons the root was discovered. Power which poisons the root creates conditions where it is not possible for the individual's power-from-within to exist. I identified this new strain of power in these responses given by the focus group at various times throughout the discussion sessions.

One focus group member revealed that the students' attention is often distracted or re-routed from their own learning proceses.

"The institution can determine what matters, what is important or what is trivial. If a professor reveals a bias, the students who naturally want to get good grades, rechannel their attention and energies away from their own educational needs or their own particular aptitudes or academic abilities and re-route that energy to comply or to serve the professors' bias or area of interest. The student's learning potential is often left untapped, hidden, undiscovered.."

Another focus group member reported that power is sometimes so oppressive that students are too intimidated to express their abilities and competencies:

" Sometimes exercising power can serve to harm the student; once a student is burned he/she is cautious about exercising power a second time. For example students may exercise autonomy by selecting special topics for assignments based on personal and professional experiences in that specific area. In these cases it is often very difficult for the professor, who does not share interest, knowledge or expertise in that area, to know how to evaluate the student fairly. Unfortunately it is not until the student receives the final grade at the end of the course, that he/she realizes that evaluation has not been fair. The student is therefore penalized for exercising autonomy. You can get burned ".

Another respondent complained that practical mechanisms, which might provide for development of student power, are absent.

"Because the adult distance learner is 'distant', interaction between the professor and the learner is limited. Opportunities for students to ask their own questions, and thereby acquire the information that they need for learning, are restricted by lack of contact among students and between students and professors. The university does not give the professors time, nor set up mechanisms, which would allow the professors to get input from the adult distance students concerning how to make graduate education more effective and successful".

One student revealed, and several others agreed, that criteria of success in a course or program is, at times, withheld.

"In one course the criteria of success was very covert and ambiguous; what was required in order to do well in the course, was a secret. For example, the assignment requirements, the themes of the lectures, and the requirements for successful performance were very elusive. I remember that up to one week before the end of the course the professors had not evaluated and returned even one assignment! We were not sure whether we were on the right track or whether we had missed the point of the course entirely. The result was that we all felt so tentative, cautious and unsure of ourselves. The learning process was so disempowering".

It is in these responses, which I interpreted as evidence of power which poisons the root, as this type of power severely limits opportunities for adult distance learners to develop their own powers-from-within.

Part 2 of the Empowerment Process: The Healing Phase:
Understanding Reasons for Disempowerment and Expanding Innate Powers

The healing phase consisted of 2 steps. During the first step the focus group was involved in understanding the reasons for their disempowerment. During the second step they were involved in identifying, unfolding and expanding their innate powers.

Step 1: Understanding Reasons for Disempowerment

The theory of symbolic interactionism provided a framework from which the focus group, through personal reflection and discussion, could arrive at an understanding of the underlying reasons for lack of power. Mezirow (1990) informs us that what is of great "significance to most adult learning is *understanding the meaning* (original italics in text) of what others

communicate concerning values, ideals, feelings, justice, love, labour, autonomy, commitment, and democracy" (p. 8). A clearer understanding of the problem would bring the focus group a step closer toward resolving the problem.

During this phase the focus group was given readings on the theory and practice of symbolic interactionism and asked to come to the sessions prepared to discuss their responses to the guiding questions relevant to symbols, meanings, identities and social interactions concerning adult distance education. These questions, central to the assumptions of symbolic interactionism and the constructs of adult education and empowerment, were posed and discussed during the focus group discussion session.

Question: What symbols are held by the university and by the distance education students of the practice of distance education? What symbols are held of the adult distance student by the institution and by the students of themselves?

All respondents indicated that many symbols associated with distance education were negative.

"Distance education ? ...... it me it is merely 'an illusion' ... critical inquiry and discussion is severely limited..therefore by definition, it cannot be true graduate education. I think that the institution perceives distance as a showcase.. an opportunity to show off the technology it offers ".

"The institution describes itself as ..'the ivory tower' and the professor is 'the expert and the adult distant student as 'only a student' ...distance education?... as it is off-campus it is not considered an integral part of the academic community"

"I agree with that symbolism......the institution thinks of a distance student as someone who is 'on the fringe'... 'out of the loop'...."

One member of the focus group recounted this story:

" When I think of a symbol for distance education courses, I think of isolation units...there is very little physical, social and intellectual interaction between the student and others in the system. Let me tell you about my experiences. One evening I received a telephone call from another distance student in the course. He said " I don't know if I should be telephoning you and talking to you, as this is a distance course. He asked if he was cheating by making contact with me... distance to him symbolized lack of contact and contact was not permitted. Gosh, he was practically whispering into the telephone receiver!"

" Distance education is symbolized as .....a 'power disperser'..students are dispersed, so their power is dispersed... distance education disperses and diffuses student power".

The data gleaned from the focus group discussions revealed that the symbols held for the practice of distance education and symbols held for the distance student were negative.

These findings; however, are not consistent with the literature. The literature reveals that both positive and negative symbols and meanings are held for the practice of distance education. As cited in Chapter 11, Review of the Related Literature, Devlin (1982) and Peterson and Fleming (1993) report of negative symbols held. However studies by Boswell, Mocker and Homlin (1968) and Silver (1990) (cited in Gore, 1993) reveal a contrasting prespective: symbols of distance education are very positive. Candy's (1991) description of the practice of distance education reveals that it is perceived as a very practical and fast growing trend in educational delivery.

The meanings, inherent to these symbols, provided an understanding of the reasons for disempowerment of the adult distance learner population. As distance students are physically isolated from the university, they are invisible and thus their needs are easily ignored; their

voices are too far away to be heard. As an invisible and silent population, they are assigned a marginal and subordinate status in the academic community. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the distance learner holds little power and that the distance learner's learning process is institution designed and directed.

Another assumption of the theory of symbolic interactionism states that meanings are created or assigned and interpreted by people through activities and social interactions (Munch, 1994). In other words, the symbols that have been constructed for distance education and for the distance education student will dictate either positive or negative social interactions.

This question was intended to involve the students in critical reflection and rational discourse for the purpose of delving deeper into the problem associated with low self and social identities by developing an awareness of low identities which are expressed and demonstrated through social interactions..

Question: Can you describe academic experiences that could be described as disempowering the student ?

All members of the focus group were at a middle stage of their careers, as all had accumulated many years of professional expertise. They felt almost humiliated with the fact that in their working lives they had attained the administrative level, yet in their academic experiences they were assigned a very low status. It appeared obvious to them, that their professional expertise was considered trivial.

"The professor developed the course and evaluated my performance according to how well I met the criteria prescribed by him. I did not have much say in my own learning process, although I have been a professional educator for 15 years. The professor does not consider the student capable or qualified to participate with him or her in designing the course.. ".

"Those in power determined what was considered valuable academic qualifications and what was considered valuable practical experience. The professors naturally held the greater share of academic qualifications and the student held the greater share of practical experiences; however, practical experiences were considered inferior to academic experiences. The student's career was subordinate to academic work. Therefore in course work, the student's professional experience is often ignored, when it should be tapped. Why can the student, if he or she holds particular expertise, not present a lecture, or even design a section of the course ?"

This focus group member complained of a particularly disempowering interaction she experienced with the administration of the university.

" In my experience, at times, particular professors treated students as subordinates...they tried to exert power over the student in different ways. For example, the student might be required to repeat things even though the student may have had years of experience in that field of study. Or a student might be required to prove to the institution that they were licensed to practice.... another way of holding power was to prevent the student from taking a specific elective".

"In one distance course I took, the students were divided into groups of five for the purpose of working together to generate group assignments. One student in my group, Diane, contacted the rest of the group through a computer mediated chat line, to inform us that she would be dropping out of the group and dropping the course. That particular course had been her first graduate distance course and she had become overwhelmed by the process. She explained "I did not realize what taking a course through distance would be like". The rest of the group were upset by this situation as we concluded that the simple reason she dropped out of the program was simply that 'she did not know' . We all felt that we should have been aware of her frustration and should have advised her. We also felt that the university failed to serve Diane's learning process ".

In this study the negative symbols and meanings that were held for the adult distance

students and for the practice of distance education were expressed and reflected through social interactions. The social interactions, between the institution and the distance student, were described by the focus group as disempowering for the student. For example, those in power did not consider the adult distance learner as one who was competent to participate in decision making concerning the educational learning. Negative social interactions between the adult distance student and the institution produced teacher-directed not student-directed education. Garrison (1988) reported that studies reveal that some educators feel that student participation will contaminate or at least dilute educational standards.

In addition, the institution did not consider the learners' life and professional experiences as valuable learning experiences and the action of the institution was to discount or to discredit these experiences. For example, the focus group findings revealed that registration requirements often dictated that the student take specific courses yet often the mid-career adult learner had already acquired a great deal of knowledge and experience in the specific content offered in that course.

Many of the social interactions between the adult distance learner and the academic institution were described by the focus group members as extremely disempowering. However, there is overwhelming evidence that positive social interaction between students and professors and among students is central to the learning process. Studies by Kaye and Rumble (1981), Keegan (1986), Keegan, John & Harry (1993), Lewis and Spencer (1986), and Tinto (1987) all contend that positive social interaction is critical to the learning process and that

lack of social interaction or negative social interaction is detrimental to the learning process. Social identity theory reveals the effects of negative social interaction; the theory states that the student's self and social identity is a critical factor which determines whether the student will persist in or drop out of a course or program. In other words, if students realize that participation in a program does not contribute to the development of a positive self and social identities, then attrition rates rise.

<u>Analysis of Empowerment Process</u>

<u>Step 1: Understanding Reasons for Disempowerment</u>

Mezirow (1990) states that "no need is more fundamentally human than our need to understand the meaning of our experience. Free, full participation is critical ... reflective discourse may be interpreted as a basic human right" (p. 11).

Through the techniques of reflection and rational discourse, the focus group developed an understanding the meaning of the problem of lack of student power and low levels of adult self-directed learning which appeared to be salient to the distance education system. The processes of critical reflection and rational discourse identified that negative symbols had been constructed for the adult distance learner and for the practice of distance education. The focus

group interpreted that these negative symbols were partially responsible for creating negative social interactions. For example, at times the adult distance learner was presumed to be ignorant of specific areas of knowledge even though he or she may have acquired that knowledge through experiential learning. The student was required to provide several pieces of evidence or proof to assure the institution that he or she was competent in that specific area of knowledge. Rational discourse revealed that sometimes even when proof was provided, the institution refused to exempt the student from repeating the course material.

Through the processes of critical reflection and rational discourse, the focus group revealed that the adult distance student was not considered a valuable member of the academic community. When a distance student was experiencing difficulty with a course, the professors often were unaware of the student's difficulty or did not care enough to try to prevent the student from dropping out.

In addition, after the focus group reflected, analyzed and discussed the symbols that had been constructed for them, it became clear that the low symbols prescribed interactions which have not been positive, nor have they developed the abilities, competencies or powers that reside within the student, nor have they promoted the practice of self-directed learning.

Similarly, the data revealed that the negative symbols constructed for the practice of distance education were partially responsible for the lack of essential ingredients of a quality education. For example the focus group revealed that the processes of critical inquiry and discussion were not integral components of graduate distance courses, yet learning theories state that these ingredients are essential to a quality education. Learning theory as well proposes that interaction between student and professors and among students supports the

learning process; however, student input was requested rarely and if it were then it was usually at feedback time only.

In conclusion as a result of the processes of critical reflection and rational discourse, the focus group were given the opportunity to explore and to gain a deeper insight into the problem. They realized that the meanings inherent in the low symbols, prescribed a second rate standard of education, limited or lack of professor-student interaction, low levels of self-directed learning as well as suppression of development of the students' powers-from-within.

Step 2: Expanding Power-From- Within

In the preceding discussion session, the focus group revealed that, as far as they were concerned, the symbols and meanings held for the adult distance learner by the institution were not positive. Symbols and meanings revealed a stereotypical social identity of a student as one who does not possess skills, competencies, knowledge and whose prior life and professional experiences are trivial.

The purpose of this discussion session was to have the focus group engage in identifying and valuing their strengths, skills, competencies. This process would involve them in reconstructing more positive self-and social identities to replace the low identities prescribed for them. These questions were posed. The responses reveal the identities which the focus group held for themselves .

Question: Do you feel that you are able to assume responsibility for your own learning? Would you like to direct your own learning process?

"I am confident in myself as a student as I work very hard. In fact at times and with some professors, if I am given a poor mark, then I interpret the situation as their not understanding my paper. Sometimes I have more confidence in my ability than their evaluation of my ability indicates".

These responses revealed that the focus group members were knowledgeable of their personal learning styles.

"I am very interested in adult learning and development; I know my own learning style. I am a global thinker. I don't necessarily do things in sequential steps, nor do I need to know all the steps. I can definitely learn without having someone lead me. I am intuitive not sensing. I have a tendency to make these humungous leaps. I have to be careful, as sometimes things which make common sense to me, may not seem logical to others I interact with. I vascilate between thinking and feeling; sometimes I am analytical and sometimes more sensing, depending on the situation. The environment that I am in determines the mode of decision making that I will choose…"

"I am a lateral thinker..I try to see the big picture by identifying the parameters of the topic, problem or issue. I identify what major characteristics or properties or issues are central. I always try to fit the topic into its political, social, economic socio-cultural environment ".

"I learn best when I try to bring my own perspective to the topic and to apply the information to my own context. I aim to discover how I can make this learning meaningful to me and to identify what is in my background that I can draw on to use to understand the topic".

The following responses indicate that the respondents understood what they

considered essential to optimize their learning process. One member of the focus group

described a personally effective method of generating assignments.

"I can make decisions quickly. I conduct research of computer mediated and print resources from the university library. I scan all the articles and decide whether the article is relevant to the paper.. I may have 90 articles stacked up on the floor of my office, as well as 20 or 30 books and my bibliography may be close to 8-10 pages. I rarely get detoured. All the material I have accessed I read and re-read and reflect on thoroughly. This process keeps me focussed. Once I turn on the computer, I have analysed everything that I have researched. Then I stay home until I finish the research paper. Sometimes I take lunch at my desk ... sometimes I am so busy that I forget to even have lunch".

Adult learners at the graduate level are competent to direct their own learning. One respondent revealed that as previous academic experiences must be positive if one attains the level of graduate studies, then there is no evidence to suggest that graduate level self-directed learning will mean failure.

" I have confidence in my abilities as I have experienced positive prior learning experiences, If I could do well before then I can do well again. Also the more literature I read on the topic, I come to realize that others support my ideas. That my ideas have been compared with the theorists and have been proven valid, gives me confidence".

"The way I learn best? I like to study something, then to take it apart and see how it was put together, then I think about how I can apply it in my own professional work. My personal learning style? I need discussion, preferably in a focus group where I can reflect on and discuss my own experiences and ideas. I need interaction with others. I also need a mentor, a faculty supervisor in the field... someone to tell me if I am on the right track... an expert in the field of education..... someone who could open your eyes to your capabilities and abilities. These things that would improve the learning process for me".

"Guidance and mentoring.....the professor is important in that he/she introduces you to material, concepts and theories, shows you the big picture..... reveals an introduction to the body of literature of that specific topic area. The professor should be a facilitator. The professor must know when to offer the adult distance student input and when to stand back and let the student learn in his/her own way and in this way provide opportunities for self-direction".

I discovered that the focus group refuted the literature concerning the link between distance education students and low self-identities. The identities which they held for themselves were very high. For example, the data revealed that the focus group were cognizant of their personal learning styles and preferred teaching-learning methodologies. Also they identified that their learning processes were served best when curriculum was relevant to their learning needs; they indicated that they preferred that the professor serve as a mentor or a facilitator rather than one who controls and directs their learning processes. Their responses revealed that they had already acquired mastery of the skills of critical reflection, rational discourse, problem solving, decision making, research skills. Responses revealed that this focus group of graduate students were knowledgeable, confident, capable and committed students.

The findings of this present study, concerning adult distance learners' self-identities, contradict the literature. What accounts for this discrepency, I assume, is that previous research has been conducted with adult learners who have not attained the level of graduate studies in post secondary educational institutions and who have not acquired years of professional experience in various work environments. In contrast,

this focus group was composed of mid-career adult learners enrolled in graduate programs at university.

Analysis of the Empowment Process:
Step 2: Expanding the Power-From-Within

During this phase of the empowering process the focus group, through the techniques of critical reflection and rational discourse, were identifying, unfolding and expanding their powers-from-within. They were developing self-knowledge by identifying personal skills, strengths, talents and by identifying both life and professional experiences that have provided valuable learning. Both Freire (1974) and Schon (1983, 1987) claim that the primary function of reflection is to validate what is known. Critical reflection and rational discourse have the potential to accomplish this.

Through the process of rational discourse, the social identities held for the students by the institution and the identities the students held of themselves, were compared, analysed and assessed. The process insured that this discrepency did not go unnoticed. For example, the negative symbols, meaning and social identities constructed for the adult distance learners were incongruent with the positive self-identities that they held for themselves.

Mezirow (1990) informs us that habit can be broken only when there is an

interruption between the habit and the event being interrupted. Critical reflection and rational discourse provide the interruptions and opportunities through which these negative symbols and assumptions held could be identified, refuted, and revised to construct more positive social identities. The focus group concluded that the symbols, meanings and identities attributed to them by the institution were identified and judged as inaccurate and unjustifiable.

The focus group intended to translate that knowledge or awareness into action. They realized that if they were to gain control over their learning processes, it was necessary that they first revise the negative social identities assigned to them. Enhanced student social identities would hopefully result in the institution viewing the adult distance learner as a competent and equal participant in the education process. Participation and democracy, in some ways, define each other. In a democratic educational process, the adult distance learner would participate in planning and directing the learning process.

Part 3 of the Empowerment Process:Demonstrating Empowerment

In the final focus group session, the group was involved in demonstrating that they had developed 'power-from-within'. The purpose of this stage was to test and to demonstrate that the focus group had the knowledge, skills and competencies to direct

direct and control their own learning.

The focus group was given readings of case studies on successful self-directed learning procedures carried out at other universities. As well they were given sample learning contracts adapted from those designed by Stephenson (1981) and Tough (1971). They were asked if they were interested in demonstrating their ability to direct their own learning by completing the self-directed learning contracts provided.

If the focus group had developed 'power-from-within' then they could assume control over and responsibility for their own learning and therefore complete the learning contracts provided. All members of the focus group responded affirmatively: they were interested in assuming responsibility for directing their own learning and each member completed a self-directed learning contract. Appendix C contains a sample learning contract.

<u>Document Analysis Data Presentation and Analysis</u>

The focus group was interested in demonstrating their positive self-identities as capable and empowered students, through action. They were interested in assuming responsibility for their own learning and in generating personal self-directed learning contracts.

Barbalet (cited in Clegg, 1995) defines responsibility, "To take responsibility in the Kantian sense involves determining what one ought to do. This requires acquiring relevant knowledge of conditions, opportunities, and consequences, examining motives and principles, and in general acquiring or discovering one's true interest in a situation in which one is

removed from the constraints of authority" (p. 7). The focus group completed the learning contracts.

The learning contracts consisted of three sections containing questions. These sections included, Section 1: Identifying Learning Needs and Objectives, Section 2: Selecting Learning Resources and Objectives, and Section 3: Determining Methods to Affirm Knowledge Acquisition and Assessment. If the focus group completed the contracts appropriately then this was considered evidence of the potential of the model to facilitate the development of 'power-from-within'. This is a sample of the responses given to the questions; the data speaks for itself.

Section 1: Identifying Learning Needs and Objectives

The learning contract read: "I am able to identify the following areas of knowledge and experience, which I indicate as strengths and weaknesses and regard as potentially relevant to the development of my programme of study".

These focus group members who had recently begun the graduate studies program were not only able to identify the topic of their theses at this early stage, but were able to identify the constructs central to the fields of research.

"My area of study is adult learning and development, therefore I need to acquire further knowledge and experience regarding learning styles, adult learners' educational needs, experiential learning or prior learning assessment, sources of learning and development literature.."

"My interest is faculty professional development in post secondary institutions. I need

knowledge of the issues concerning faculty development in terms of teaching and learning...current literature and research in this area. I have already some knowledge and experience in the area having worked with a variety of staff and personnel in the coordination and implementation of faculty development activities at the university for 10 years.."

"My area of study is administration of post secondary institutions. I need to become more knowledgeable of sociological and administrative theory. I would like to develop skills in academic writing, this would allow me to write for academic journals, to have my ideas expressed, reviewed, tested and challenged by others .."

Another respondent had completed all graduate level courses and was in the process of

identifying a thesis topic. She determined that her thesis would be concerned with nursing

leadership. She determined that research in this field would meet her learning needs working

in the new restructured health care system.

"My area of study is health care administration from my 20 years working as a nurse, I have already acquired knowledge of the health care system and the nursing profession. What I need now is knowledge of transformational leadership, the critical issues facing the health care system, the changing roles of nurses..."

Section 2: Selecting Learning Resources and Activities

The learning contract read: "In order to acquire these areas of knowledge and

expertise, I have identified these learning resources which I plan to use and these learning

activities which I plan to perform".

The focus group respondents had no difficulty in determining how they would like to

carry out their learning process.

"I need to interview resource people I need to consult with faculty advisors, experts at

other academic institution... I would wish to network with others in the field. I would like to attend conferences whose focus is adult learning and development .."

"I need to interview administration and faculty of post secondary institution concerning the status of faculty professional development. I would ask them to identify the critical issues facing the area and future directions of faculty development activities ,...I am specifically interested in the professional development literature on teaching and learning.. I would need to become knowledgeable of comparative studies of professional development initiatives carried out at other institutions..."

These responses indicate that these focus group members were able to identify learning resources and activities which would facilitate their learning processes.

"I would like to develop knowledge of ethnography qualitative research computer programs... I need to have access to a medical library...
I would like to develop a proposal in which I would describe what I like to learn. I would like to have it evaluated by faculty advisors. I would like to conduct my own education but I would like the advisors to follow my progress to ensure that the project stays on track...".

This respondent cited as well, psychological resources as essential resources which facilitate learning.

"I need access to an excellent library, especially an excellent periodical section as well as the Internet. I would like to attend conferences. I would like to receive respect, support, encouragement from faculty advisors. I would wish that the faculty advisors would merely introduce me to the scope of my field of interest and let me identify what I need to learn and what is of particular interest to me and then to give me the freedom and encouragement to go from there.."

Section 3: Determining Methods to Affirm Knowledge Acquisition and to Assessment

The learning contract read: "I have formulated the following plans for individual work and study. I propose the following forms of assessment to provide evidence of accomplishment

of each learning objective".

Several respondents cited a similar method of evaluation, that is, if the work holds true

in the external world of work, then that learning is evaluated as valid.

"I would like to conduct my own research in the area of faculty professional development (re teaching and learning) and then to evaluate it to determine if the literature supports my research.I would evaluate information according to how useable, practical, helpful or valuable it is to the field of post secondary faculty professional development".

This focus group member indicated that she was not only capable of identifying

evaluation methods but that, in fact, she was interested in conducting self-evaluation.

"I would like to conduct research into the field of health care administration and to write a series of papers or theses. My research methods would include interviews with administrators, job shadowing and a review of the literature. I would like to be able to go into the health care environment to observe ....for the purpose of determining if the literature and the practice coincide...This would evaluate the quality of my learning process...".

"I do not think that evaluation, in the traditional perception, would be necessary. If the adult learner and the faculty advisors are in contact during the learning process, then a sort of quality assurance/quality control component is build into the learning process to ensure against failure. Adult learners are committed, conscientious , responsible students. ..and to conduct evaluation is antithetical to the concept of adult learner".

Generation of self-directed learning contracts was positive indication of the model's

potential to facilitate the process of student empowerment. An empowered student is able to

determine personal learning needs, an empowered student is able to identify learning

resources, an empowered student is able to identify and utilize preferred teaching and learning

methods (Cafferella & O'Donnell, 1989; Evans & Nation, 1989;O'Neill, 1976; Tough, 1971).

Analysis of the Empowerment Process: Demonstrating Empowerment

Each member of the focus group completed all sections and requirements of the learning contracts then the contracts were analysed. If the participant had assumed responsibility and was able to complete the contracts, this would indicate that he or she had indeed developed 'power-from-within'. Empowered students can assume control and responsibility for their own learning and are able to generate self-directed learning contracts. The data from this study is supported by Chene (1983), Darkenwald and Merriam (1982); Kasworm (1983), Knowles (1980), Mezirow (1990), Rappaport (1981), Sabbaghian's (1980) and as well, Starhawk (1987). These theorists state that a positive correlation exists between the adult's psychological characteristic of self-confidence, self-esteem, and feelings of empowerment; similarly a positive correlation exists between positive self-concept and learner self-directedness.

The data collected in this study is intended to present a verbatim account of what was revealed in the focus group discussion sessions. It is intended to create a vivid understanding of the focus group's experience of the adult distance learner's learning process. The empowerment process provided the focus group with the tools necessary to allow them to develop the powers that reside within through developing and sharing their reflections and perceptions of themselves and of their learning processes.

Through the processes of critical reflection and rational discussion, the focus

group members identified, unfolded and expanded their powers-from-within. It was evident that a very strong link exists between student empowerment and the ability to direct one's own learning. Development of the power-from-within enabled the focus group to make decisions concerning their own learning and enabled them to demonstrate this capability by generating self-directed learning contracts. The empowerment model has the potential to develop the adult distance learner's power-from-within and in so doing, facilitate the learner's ability to direct his or her own learning process.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study will hopefully produce both conceptual and substantive implications concerning adult learners, empowerment, self-directed learning and distance education. Allow me to discuss my conclusions pertaining to each of these constructs.

<u>Adult Learners</u>

Historically, once a lifetime career began, education or training in that particular career ceased. Yet in today's professional environments, organizational psychologists tell us that individuals may be required to relearn their careers many times during their lifespan (Fullan, 1993; Jarvis, 1987; Slotnick et al , 1993). Adults return intermittently to educational institutions in order to keep abreast of the ever changing nature and demands of their careers. Therefore it is very plausible that the adult learner in post secondary institutions may be one who has acquired several years of education in various academic fields, and one who has developed professional expertise in a variety of workplace settings. It is essential that a positive social identity be reconstructed for the new adult distance learner population, as the identity held traditionally described one who had been disadvantaged both academically and professionally. A new identity would reflect a well-educated and professionally experienced individual and one who could be a worthy and competent partner in the education process.

I recommend that professional development, to involve critical reflection, be provided for educators of this new adult distance learner population. Schon (1987), one of the leading

advocates of the process of critical reflection claims that reflection on professional practice makes the educator thoughtful about his or her work in light of the principles the educator holds. He claims that reflection targets and identifies inappropriate or inaccurate values, perceptions, meanings and philosophies. The process of critical reflection would require educators to re-evaluate and to revise the low social identities that they previously held for adult distance learners. Clegg (1989) warns that institutions survive or die depending upon how badly they fail, or how well they change to match the social and cultural environment in which they operate. I recommend that opportunities for professional development, specifically using the process of critical reflection, be provided for educators of adults. According to Fullan (1993) and Schon (1983, 1987), the process of critical reflection has the potential to facilitate adaptation to educational change.

Empowerment and Self-Direction

As discussed earlier in this paper, self-direction is an approach and practice which is central to adulthood, central to the goal of adult education and central to the philosophy of education. However, low levels of self-directed learning indicate that within institutions, there is a resistance to this, characteristically, andragogical practice. Fullan (1993) advises us that in fact, a theory of non-change permeates educational institutions. Universities are traditional, cultural institutions that promote the methods and ideas which reflect mainly those of the dominant undergraduate student population. As teacher-directed learning is the traditional method of educational practice, it is not surprising that the theories and methods of graduate student-directed learning are resisted. Resistance to change has adversely affected adult learners' learning

processes. Pedagogical approaches have resulted in suppression of the development of student empowerment or of development of the students' innate powers-from-within. Pedagogical approaches have thus produced teacher-directed, rather than a student-directed adult learning. Again I recommend that educators be provided opportunities to engage in critical reflection through professional development. The process of critical reflection would require educators to learn andragogical approaches to replace inappropriate pedagogical approaches.

In addition, I feel that resistance to self-directed learning is the result of several other erroneous perceptions held by faculty. I assume that faculty perceives that the practice of the student directing his or her own learning would involve a shift of power out of their hands and to those of the student. In other words, student-directed learning would produce a reduction of faculty professional power. However Starhawk's concept of power, as used in this study, refers to developing powers that already reside within the student and which, through social interaction between the student and the professor, are identified and allowed to surface, unfold and expand. Therefore, adult learner empowerment would not involve a transfer of power away from the faculty but an expansion of the power within the student.

Once again I recommend that the institution provide professional development in order that educators can explore, explain and promote the distinctions between the various concepts and practices of power. I also recommend that, as empowerment and self-direction are tightly linked, educators must learn how to facilitate or nurture development of the student's power-from-within. Development of the student's innate powers is necessary, prior to and in preparation for, the self-directed learning process.

Another recommendation for research would be that of a study of what the focus group identified as 'power which poisons the root'. This power severely suppresses and limits opportunities for development of the adult distance learner's power-from-within. It is a very toxic power about which we know relatively little.

Resistance to self-directed learning I believe, is also attributed to faculty's perception that the input of the student would compromise the legitimacy of educational programs. The orientation of educational institutions is to maintain credibility and to avoid discreditation. However contrary to the low social identities and meanings that have been ascribed to adult distance learners, their input can indeed be very beneficial to the institution. The institution can tap fresh sources of knowledge and expertise for the adult learner has much to contribute. Fullan (1993) reminds us that a successful university learns more from the students in the environment than from faculty, administrators or competitors. Candy (1991) and Knowles (1980) state that the purpose and goal of education and specifically of adult education is to assist the students to develop their abilities and potential to contribute to their own learning. Moreover research shows, and with little doubt, that when students hold a certain degree of ownership for their learning the motivation and retention are increased (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991; Owens, 1995; Slavin, 1990).

With these arguments in mind I perceive two roles are prescribed for adult educators : (1) the educator-as-chef and (2) the educator-as-midwife. The role of the educator-as-chef is to introduce the adult learner to the wide array of fields of study from which the adult learner can identify and select those subjects, theories, concepts, approaches and issues which are of

importance to him or her. Strike (cited in Candy, 1991) advises that "the ignorance of a person just beginning the study of a subject has a special character. It is not just that the novice is ignorant of the subject matter but the novice is ignorant of the theories, constructs, philosophies and major questions that govern thought about that subject" (p. 357). The educator-as-chef would merely present the broad parameters of subjects, and then to step back to allow the learner to carry out the process of directing his or her own learning in the way that is most personally effective. The second role I prescribe for the educator is that of educator-as-midwife. Belinky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1985) created the concept of 'professor-as-midwife' which they describe as "one who assists the learner in giving birth to his or her own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and in elaborating on it" (p. 217).

Research is needed to identify and prescribe roles, that the educator might assume in a student-directed learning situation. I also recommend that further research be conducted to explore the educators' experiences and involvement.

As well, I recommend that research be conducted concerning resources which the learner might tap to better facilitate his or her self-teaching-learning process. Some examples might include research concerning how to conduct personal needs assessment, how to identify and access learning resources as mentoring or job shadowing or how to conduct self-evaluation.

Distance Education

The distance mode of educational delivery provides both flexibility and accessibility. Even though advances in technology have provided a variety of new delivery modes, over 70% of distance learners still experience their education principally through written materials. Non-

interactive methods are still the most common teaching-learning methods in distance education. Yet Lord and Jarman (cited in Fullan, 1993) contend that "the reality of evolutionary success demonstrates that fitness is not simply about adapting to the environment but rather the continuing improvement in the capacity to grow and build ever more connections in more varied environments" (p. 84). Distance education must not only provide accessibility and flexibility but must also provide quality. According to Hodgkinson (1983) the concept of quality is perceived by students to include effective communication, student-focussed social interaction and provision of relevant and current knowledge. Thus social interaction is of critical importance to a quality learning process. However, distance education, by definition, limits social interaction among students, and between students and professors. This mode of educational delivery isolates the learner from specifically those people who can contribute most significantly to his or her learning process.

If institutions do not provide adequately and effectively for the adult distance learner's learning process then the consequence could be decreased enrollment. Already several Canadian and American universities have formed agreements to provide for students to transfer to whichever institution, that they feel, best serves their learning needs. Unquestionably, from the findings of this study, attention to the adult learner's needs for social interaction is critical. Social interaction is of tremendous importance to the success of the adult distance learner's learning process.

I recommend that educators not lose sight of the fact that despite the lure of modern technology, provision of an old-fashioned element, social interaction, is critical. I recommend that research be conducted to identify ways to facilitate greater social interaction between the

educator, in the institution, and the distance learner remote from the institution.

Conclusion

I have tried to create an awareness of the uniqueness of mid-career adult distance learners who are increasingly populating graduate programs in post secondary educational institutions. The purpose of a university is to provide a learning environment that is responsive to the cultural and economic milieu. The university is thus professionally obligated to adapt programs and services to meet the unique characteristics, changing needs and expectations of this non-dominant student population. Adult distance learners' needs include, autonomy to assess educational needs and to identify personal learning goals, support necessary to identify and implement preferred learning styles and freedom to choose teaching-learning methods which best facilitate personal learning. These needs define self-directed learning.

The values, freedom of choice, self-determination, self-actualization, autonomy, creativity, recognition and respect are inherent to the theory and practice of adult self-directed learning. In fact, the literature affirms that a professional's psychological or intrinsic needs for involvement, self-determination, achievement and respect are extremely high (Maslow, 1970; Owens, 1995). Hodgkinson (1983) advises policy makers that "the deadliest weapons in the policy makers armoury are philosophical: the skills of logic and critical analysis...value analysis .. and most fundamentally, the depth of understanding of human nature" (p. 53). I recommend that policy makers in universities, and educators alike, be responsive to the unique characteristics, needs and expectations of the adult distance learner. I feel optimistic, as they are adult learners themselves, that they will succeed.

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APPENDIX A

CORRESPONDENCE

(1.) Letter of Informed Consent

(2.) Questionnaire Consent Form

(3.) Description of the Study and Role of the Participant

Dear Graduate Student :

I am a Master of Education (Post-Secondary Education) Leadership candidate at Memorial University. I am gathering data for my thesis entitled Toward Adult Learner Autonomy and Self-Directed Learning in Distance Education. The purpose of my research is to explore the relationship between learner autonomy and student-directedness and the adult learning process.

I am conducting research of graduate students in the post-secondary program who are taking courses through distance education because those in the post-secondary program, familiar with adult learning theory, show greatest potential for research in self-directed learning (Kasworm, 1983). This study will introduce participants to a knowledge base of several critical areas within the field of post-secondary education; it will introduce participants to a research process which would serve them well in their own thesis writing efforts and most importantly the participation of individuals is critical to high quality research. I am requesting your participation in this study. Participation includes completing a 2 question questionnaire. From analysis of this questionnaire, a research sample will be identified and invited to participate in a focus group. Each week for three weeks the focus group will be given readings of approximately 20 pages per week on topics critical to adult education, asked to read, reflect on and to participate in discussion of these topics through e-mail. Participation is voluntary, you may choose not to perform any task you do not choose to and you may withdraw at any time.

This research study meets the ethical guidelines of the Ethics Review Committee, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland. All data gathered in this study, both from the questionnaire and from the focus group discussion sessions, is strictly confidential. Data from focus group sessions will be saved on a computer disc and secured in a locked cabinet; these recordings will not be disclosed to any other person other than the researcher and erasure of these recordings, once your participation is complete, is assured. Results will be made available to you upon request.

If you need further explanation of any part of the information please telephone me: 753-7795 or contact me through e-mail. Dr. Clar Doyle, Professor of Education within the Faculty of Education, Division of Graduate Studies, my thesis supervisor, may be reached by telephone at 737-7556. If you wish to speak with a resource person not associated with the study you may contact Dr. Patricia Canning, Associate Dean, Research and Development, Graduate Studies, Faculty of Education, Memorial University..

If you wish to participate, please answer the 2 questions on the back of this letter as well as the consent form and return it to me via e-mail to therese @ ganymede.cs.mun.ca. Many thanks.

Sincerely,

Therese Royle

Questionnaire Consent Form

I, _____ consent to the questionnaire. I understand that

participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw my participation at any time.

All information is strictly confidential and no individual will be identified to anyone other

than the researcher.

Date_____   Signature_____   E-mail Address_____

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

AND

THE ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANT

Phase 1. Identifying Where Oppressive Power Suppress Empowerment of the Student

Students will be given selected readings and requested to read, reflect on and in group decisions engage in rational discourse concerning the theories presented in the readings and their experiences of these theories in practice.

I will provide transcripts on the theory and practice of the two components of the model, critical reflection and rational discourse, as well as position papers on theory and practice concerned with the pedagogies of symbolic interactionism, critical theory and self-concept theory. These readings will be read and then analysed by the focus group. The learning combined with the techniques of critical reflection and rational discourse, to create an awareness of the problem of lack of student power and generate an understanding of the factors which have contributed to this problem. The purpose of this session is to foster a feeling of permission to criticize sources of power who have assisted in suppressing the development of the powers that reside within the adult learner.

Phase 2. Expanding, Unfolding and Developing ' Power-from-Within'

This session is intended to explore, identify and expand the powers that reside within the individual. The model will present transcripts for reading, reflection, analysis and

discussion, on andragogy and empowerment as well as case studies on actual applications of self-directed learning initiatives.

Psychotherapists inform us that if an individual's perceptions can be modified then it is highly likely that his/her behaviour will be modified accordingly. Through the processes of critical reflection and rational discourse, it is hoped that the focus group will, by identifying personal strengths, skills, competencies and valuable prior life and professional experiences, modify and enhance their self-perceptions. Hopefully, the adult distance learners will be approaching a stage of expressing their enhanced, empowered identies by developing contracts which will direct their learning processes.

Phase 3: Demonstrating Empowerment

This final phase will engage the focus group, who have now identified and expanded the power-from-within and who have learned the process of self-directed learning, will demonstrate that power, skill mastery, and knowledge expertise. The focus group will be given sample learning covenants and requested to develop their own learning plans based on the case studies samples provided. The covenants are adapted from the self-directed process as summarized by Stephenson (1981) and Tough (1971). The contracts will require the members of the focus group to identify their learning needs and set learning goals and objectives, to determine and select activities, methods or learning resources to be used in the learning process, and to identify and select evaluation methods.

APPENDIX B

(1.) Preliminary Questionnaire

(2.) List of Major Guiding Questions

Preliminary Questionnaire
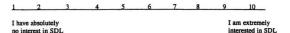
Question 1: Instructions:

Every adult learner holds a particular concept of his/her ability as a student. The scale below attempts to translate that level of "self-concept of ability as a student" into measurable terms. Select the number you feel describes the level of "self-concept as a student" which you hold for yourself. = ———

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

I have absolutely
no confidence
in my ability
student.

I have total
confidence in
my ability as as a
a student

Question 2 : Instructions:

Please select the number on the scale which indicates your level of interest in the concepts and practice of self-directed learning (SDL) = ———

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

I have absolutely
no interest in SDL

I am extremely
interested in SDL

Source: Boud, D. (1981). Developing Student Autonomy in Learning. London: Kogan Page.

Guiding Research Questions Central to the Assumptions of Critical Theory

Why are attrition rates and levels of dissatisfaction in adult distance education so high ?
Is disempowerment a problem ?

Who holds power and exerts control over the distance education process ?

What are the needs and interests of the adult distance learner? Have these needs been served or
have they been marginalized or ignored ?

What has conspired to create this imbalance of power ?

What factors contribute to the disempowerment of the adult distance student?

Guiding Research Questions Central to the Assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism

What symbols are held by the university and by the adult distance learner of the practice of distance education?

What symbols are held by the university of the adult distance student?

What self-identities are held by the adult distance learners?

How are these symbols constructed and what meanings do these symbols hold?

What roles do these meanings dictate in interactions between the adult distance learner and the university?

Can you describe social interactions between the adult distance learner and the institution that were particularly disempowering for the student?

Guiding Research Questions Central to Empowerment and Self-Directed Learning

Can you describe your learning process, that is, with your knowledge of adult learning and development, are you aware of and can you describe your personal learning style and your preferred teaching and learning methodologies?

How can student empowerment be developed which will lead to participation between the adult distance learner and the university in decision making concerning the learning process?

What are your learning needs, objectives and goals ?

Which learning resources would you identify and access to serve those learning needs?

Which methods would you identify to affirm knowledge acquisition and assessment ?

Do you feel that you would like to assume responsibility for directing your own learning?

APPENDIX C

Sample Self-Directed Learning Contract

THE LEARNING COVENANT

(adapted from Stephenson and Tough)

Name:

Name of Faculty Advisor/advisors:

Area of Study:

PHASE 1:   **CONDUCTING NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

I am able to identify the following areas of knowledge and
experiences, which I indicate as strengths and weaknesses and
regard as potentially relevant to the development of my programme
of study:

PHASE 2:   IDENTIFYING LEARNING NEEDS AND OBJECTIVES

I am able to identify that I will need to have acquired the
following areas of knowledge and experience.

PHASE 3:   SELECTING LEARNING RESOURCES AND ACTIVITIES

In order to acquire these areas of knowledge and experience, I have
identified these learning resources which I plan to use and
these learning activities which I plan to perform.

I have formulated the following plans for individual work and
central studies .

I propose the following forms of assessment to provide evidence of accomplishment of each learning objective.