

Women's Leadership and Identity in the Distance Learning Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of rapidly expanding distance learning opportunities on nontraditional female students. With this expansion, women who may be above traditional age, first-generation college students, working full-time jobs, or those who act as caregivers are now able to access higher education. Though these fresh learning opportunities may seem encouraging, succeeding in an online learning environment can be fraught with obstacles. These challenges may include issues related to technical proficiency, online insecurities due to previous digital harassment, difficulties balancing personal and professional demands alongside academic work, and anxiety associated with previous academic outcomes. Each of these challenges is embedded within the greater strain of developing and maintaining multiple student and leadership identities that may lead to conflict in daily life. Female students are demonstrating the ability to engage with these challenges in order to obtain an education that can enhance leadership skills and personal achievement.

INTRODUCTION

Online higher education opportunities continue to expand for students. In the Fall of 2014, there were 5,750,417 enrolled students in distance learning courses.¹ Originally the domain of specialized, private universities, online courses are now offered by a wide range of institutions, including community colleges, large public universities, well-established, prestigious institutions, and non-profit schools. As these programs develop, more students have the opportunity to pursue a degree or retraining with flexible schedules. This wide array of investment in distance learning brings more educational options for nontraditional students as well as students in geographically isolated areas. Women, who in 2014 were 56% of undergraduate learners, may specifically benefit from increased opportunities for higher education.² Online education provides an opportunity to encourage leadership identity for nontraditional female students.

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2015*, [Table 311.15](#).

² U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2001 through Spring 2015, Fall Enrollment component; and Enrollment in Degree-Granting Institutions Projection Model, 1980 through 2025. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2015*, [table 303.70](#).

CHALLENGES FOR FEMALE LEARNERS IN ONLINE CLASSROOMS

Female students may be poised to reap the benefits of growing distance learning opportunities.³ Along with growing enrollment, female students demonstrate a willingness to undergo a significant strain on personal and professional roles in order to further educational attainment.⁴ Distance learners who work low-wage jobs are also able to pursue higher education without the need for transportation access or child care.⁵ Women with multiple responsibilities, such as family and employment, may choose online education because it offers more flexibility.⁶ Without online learning opportunities, some female students would be unable to reach their educational goals for personal achievement or professional advancement.

The technology proficiency associated with distance learning may be daunting to some students, and studies have observed some women's hesitancy to explore technology freely, particularly when they are overworked.⁷ Even so, women have embraced technology for specific task accomplishment and social connection in supportive environments.⁸ Vandebroek, Verschelden, and Boonaert show that when observing computer literacy among female participants, "the only demographic variable explaining the divide in our female sample is age: the youngest age group having some advantages."⁹ Increasing computer proficiency among younger

³ Johnson, R. D. (2011). "Gender Differences in E-learning: Communication, Social Presence, and Learning Outcomes". *Journal of Organizational and End User Computing (JOEUC)*, 23(1), 79-94. doi:10.4018/joeuc.2011010105

⁴ Lisa C. Hetzel, "How Multiple Roles Influence Adult College Women's Online Student Experiences in a Rural Community College Context." Order No. 3548396, Iowa State University, 2012. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1270798038?accountid=458>.

⁵ Angela D. Benson, "An Exploratory Study of Online Postsecondary Education for Low-Income Working Adults: A View from Education Support Programs." *The Journal of Negro Education* 76, no. 1 (2007): 17-30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40026327>.

⁶ Hetzel, "How Multiple Roles"

⁷ Likoebe M. Maruping and Massimo Magni. "What's the Weather Like? the Effect of Team Learning Climate, Empowerment Climate, and Gender on Individuals' Technology Exploration and Use." *Journal of Management Information Systems* 29, no. 1 (2012): 79-114.

⁸ Maruping, L. M., & Magni, M. (2012). "What's the Weather Like?" and Johnson, R. D. (2011). "Gender Differences in E-learning"

⁹ Michel Vandebroek, Griet Verschelden., and Tom Boonaert. (2008). "E-learning in a Low-status Female Profession: The Role of Motivation, Anxiety and Social Support in the Learning Divide: E-learning in a Low-status Female Profession." *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 24(3), 181-190. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2729.2007.00252.x

women may also help to reduce anxiety about technology and may promote valuable exploratory behaviors.¹⁰

Women are becoming more at ease with distance learning platforms, and by prioritizing social usage, they may also be able to better support other learners and promote a strong community within the classroom. According to Maruping and Magni, female users “are likely to be prompted to explore technology when the environment supports such behavior and encourages social sharing of the experience.”¹¹ Women consistently make more social use of the distance learning environment, which enhances overall engagement.¹² This could reinforce the social benefits experienced by other female users and help to create a positive community within a distance learning classroom. Greater use of online platforms could also enhance a student’s social identity because “our sense of identity and cohesion come from others.”¹³ The more the instructor and fellow classmates socially acknowledge a student as contributing value and insight into the classroom, the greater the cohesion of the evolving identity.

IDENTITY IN AN ONLINE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

Finding a sense of community and connection can offer additional opportunities to refine the skills that transfer readily outside the classroom.¹⁴ Online classrooms offer the opportunity to interact and build relationships with other students and faculty from diverse backgrounds around the world. Feeling comfortable expressing individual ideas and opinions to a diverse audience in an online classroom setting may lead to greater confidence in other environments as well.¹⁵ Increasing these social benefits can create a vibrant learning communication that may promote satisfaction and retention.¹⁶ Johnson finds that “communication differences between women and men in e-learning environments exist, and that these differences may provide females a richer, more connected, and

¹⁰ Maruping, L. M., & Magni, M. (2012). “What's the Weather Like?”

¹¹ Maruping & Magni, “What's the Weather Like?” 88.

¹² Johnson, “Gender Differences in E-learning”

¹³ Neil Harrison, "Engaging Identities in a Regional University Classroom." *Higher Education* 56, no. 2 (2008): 241-258.

¹⁴ Johnson, “Gender Differences in E-learning”

¹⁵ Keopuhiwa, T., Srivastava, N., Oonge, H., & Maundu, I. (2012). HEAR ME OUT! The Use of Identity, Space, and Voice in an Online Classroom. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, 14(1), 16-63A,64A,65A,66A,67A,68A,69A,70A,71A,72A,73A,74A,75A,76A,128A,129A. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1287596951?accountid=458>

¹⁶ C. Linda Laing and Gregory K. Laing. "A Conceptual Framework for Evaluating Attrition in Online Courses." *E-Journal of Business Education and Scholarship Teaching* 9, no. 2 (2015): 39.

more valuable learning experience than males.”¹⁷ Instructors can actively foster the learning community within the classroom to maximize this student’s success.¹⁸

Female students who juggle multiple roles such as student, employee, mother, wife, and community participant encounter additional difficulties when dealing with the demands of college.¹⁹ Students can also feel anxiety about the requirements for the courses and may be confronted with work that is above their ability.²⁰ If women are experiencing work overload, they are less inclined to explore technology freely and, therefore, experience greater anxiety about technology.²¹ This increases challenges for students attending classes in an exclusively digital environment, such as an online classroom. Fortunately, asynchronous courses offer greater flexibility for students to approach the material at a pace that can work well for them. Without the requirement for face-to-face participation, a student can take extra time and care in crafting appropriate and detail-oriented responses in the online classroom.²²

First-generation college students may experience many challenges as they create a hybrid identity between their academic and non-academic social personas.²³ Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin find that first-generation students, “may feel like outsiders at school as well as home is especially relevant to research regarding multiple-identity negotiation.”²⁴ Adjusting to the demands of college-level work, personal commitments, professional obligations, and the multiple layers of identity that correspond with each present unique challenges for students. In particular, women who were nontraditional age downplay behaviors that highlight their identities as college students.²⁵ Maintaining a hybrid identity that is not fully student, professional, or caregiver

¹⁷ Johnson, “Gender Differences in E-learning,” 85.

¹⁸ James W. Peltier, John A. Schibrowsky, and William Drago. "The Interdependence of the Factors Influencing the Perceived Quality of the Online Learning Experience: A Causal Model." *Journal of Marketing Education* 29, no. 2 (2007): 140-153.

¹⁹ Hetzel, “How Multiple Roles”

²⁰ Harrison, “Engaging Identities”

²¹ Maruping & Magni, “What's the Weather Like?”

²² Peltier, Schibrowsky, & Drago, “The Interdependence of the Factors”

²³ Tina Wildhagen. "Not Your Typical Student": The Social Construction of the "First-Generation" College Student." *Qualitative Sociology* 38, no. 3 (2015): 285.

²⁴ Nicole M. Stephens, MarYam G. Hamedani, and Mesmin Destin. "Closing the Social-Class Achievement Gap: A Difference-Education Intervention Improves First-Generation Students' Academic Performance and all Students' College Transition." *Psychological Science* 25, no. 4 (2014): 943-953.

²⁵ Ibid.

heightens challenges to engage productively, dynamically, and consistently with the new material being introduced.

An online classroom can offer a new opportunity for students who may have had previous negative experiences in classrooms, to reinvent their identities as scholars and leaders. "Learning and teaching have the potential to call up some of the most powerful forces of the personality like anxiety, fear, antagonism, frustration, ignorance, neediness, joy and competition."²⁶ Entering a classroom again even, in digital form, may be an emotionally fraught experience for students who have had mixed success in the past. They may see themselves back in an antagonistic relationship with learning, or they can see themselves as shaping a new identity. Previous experiences such as poor test scores on standardized exams or being labeled a struggling student can influence identity even if students are enthusiastic about learning.²⁷ With the appropriate support of constructive acknowledgment and feedback from the instructor, a student's positive academic identity can be affirmed and the student can feel empowered in their academic journey.²⁸ Women, in particular, are able to build meaningful relationships in online communities with others who share social identities, ideas, or experiences.²⁹ The flexibility and dynamism of an online classroom offer a way for students to construct or rebuild authentic identities.³⁰

Distance learning classrooms may be an ideal environment to test and cultivate leadership skills. A wide range of leadership instruction is now available online and is most effectively taught to adult learners through dynamic engagement and by building on life experiences.³¹ Rather than avoiding leadership opportunities, women are strong leaders in online writing groups and are more likely to promote and defend their ideas.³² Spending time in a leadership role in an online

²⁶ Harrison, "Engaging Identities," 254.

²⁷ Allison Skerrett, "'We Hatched in this Class': Repositioning of Identity in and Beyond a Reading Classroom." *The High School Journal* 95, no. 3 (2012): 62-75.

²⁸ Harrison, "Engaging Identities"

²⁹ Kitsy Dixon, "Feminist Online Identity: Analyzing the Presence of Hashtag Feminism." *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 3, no. 7 (07, 2014): 34-40.

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1649096406?accountid=458>.

³⁰ Keopuhiwa et al., "Hear Me Out! The Use of Identity, Space, and Voice"

³¹ Eleftheria Argyropoulou, "The Challenge of Ethical Leadership University Courses: Preparing Leaders for an Uncertain, Turbulent and Divert Future." *Revista Lusófona De Educação* 30, no. 30 (2015).

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1761571087?accountid=458>.

³² Ritke Jones, William Fred. "Forces in Space: A Bakhtinian Exploration of Online Writing Groups." ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2004.

classroom can offer a fresh identity for a student who may hesitate to self-identify as a leader. Stets and Burke note that one's identities are composed of the self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles."³³ If students engage with more leadership opportunities in a challenging and supportive community, this may offer a transformative identity experience. Distance learning classrooms offer diverse and flexible approaches to leadership instruction that includes user-generated content as well as traditional instruction strategies.³⁴ This increasing interest in leadership skills is also found in professional and academic settings, so students are better prepared for successful leadership opportunities in future courses or workplaces.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS THROUGH CHALLENGES

Online classrooms can provide ways to help a student engage productively with the course material and experience a feeling of accomplishment in the classroom.³⁵ Well-managed online classrooms have a unique opportunity to provide a place for students to enjoy equal opportunities to speak and be heard, particularly for individuals who may be reserved and easily eclipsed in a physical classroom.³⁶ Students who may have felt overwhelmed or disengaged in a traditional face-to-face classroom may benefit from the alternate environment of an online classroom. A virtual space without the demands of a physical environment offers a space for women to share their unique narratives, which may be silenced in a different venue.³⁷ Common strategies for dominating a classroom discussion are not available for students because "a person cannot be louder than another in an online environment."³⁸ If a classroom is well-maintained by a supportive instructor, this neutralized space allows greater opportunities for reserved or uncertain students to contribute their unique insights or analysis. Standardized participation requirements in an online course may also encourage diverse student contributions that might be absent in a face-to-face classroom.

³³ Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke. "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 224-237.

³⁴ Kirstin Phelps, "Leadership Online: Expanding the Horizon." *New Directions for Student Services* 2012, no. 140 (2012): 65-75.

³⁵ Hetzel, "How Multiple Roles"

³⁶ Keopuhiwa et al., "Hear Me Out! The Use of Identity, Space, and Voice"

³⁷ Dixon, "Feminist Online Identity"

³⁸ Keopuhiwa et al., "Hear Me Out! The Use of Identity, Space, and Voice," 71.

Online environments hold the possibility of rich social engagement, interaction, and community building, but may also feel unsafe for many women. Many women have experienced hostility in diverse online environments, which may reduce their overall comfort online. Women who have interacted on social media can experience a wide range of harassment.³⁹ Beginning in 2013, there was a significant uptick in threats made toward high profile women.⁴⁰ This negative online culture of harassment may impact the way women experience the Internet. Though technology proficiency gaps between men and women online may be narrowing, the way women experience online communities can be alienating. Distance learning classrooms must work to overcome hostile experiences. Instructors can promote a civil and productive environment that encourages productive community building by, “writing in a conversational tone, using students’ names in the postings, and including personal notes in the group feedback.”⁴¹

A supportive community is an important motivator and building block for classroom success, but students still need more than the recognition and association of their fellow students. The instructor must offer key support and acknowledgment as students create their future identities.⁴² Instructors can foster the critical analysis and deconstruction of previous academic labels or identities that students have experienced.⁴³ Students need acknowledgment of their anxieties, but also recognition of their contributions and personal value.⁴⁴ Welcoming diverse voices, experiences, and backgrounds can create a learning community that offers dynamic support for evolving identities.⁴⁵ Students may feel more comfortable expressing ideas and feeling heard in a distance learning classroom.⁴⁶ This increase in comfort and interaction can enhance the learning process. Without this recognition, support, and acknowledgment of their struggles, students may be overwhelmed with doubts about their uncertain identities.⁴⁷

³⁹ Dixon, “Feminist Online Identity”

⁴⁰ Emma A. Jane, “Flaming? What Flaming? The Pitfalls and Potentials of Researching Online Hostility.” *Ethics and Information Technology* 17, no. 1 (2015): 65-87.

⁴¹ Roger N. Conaway, Susan S. Easton, and Wallace V. Schmidt. “Strategies for Enhancing Student Interaction and Immediacy in Online Courses.” *Business Communication Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2005): 23-35.

⁴² Harrison, “Engaging Identities,”

⁴³ Skerrett, ““We Hatched in This Class””

⁴⁴ Harrison, “Engaging Identities”

⁴⁵ Keopuhiwa et al., “Hear Me Out! The Use of Identity, Space, and Voice”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Harrison, “Engaging Identities,”

While online education can provide flexible access to many potential students, particularly those above traditional age, it is not a panacea for all higher education needs.⁴⁸ Beaudoin finds that though there is a common perception that online education opportunities equalize educational access, in fact, institutions that provide distance learning must work to reduce the extant discrepancies that students continue to encounter.⁴⁹ Consideration of learner readiness, offline support networks, learning style, and computer literacy can help students better thrive in distance learning courses.⁵⁰ Supporting students that face challenges should be a priority for institutions that purport to expand higher education access. “The paradox facing universities is - that in accommodating the growing demand for online educational opportunities, they face the daunting task of dealing with a high attrition rate.”⁵¹ Providing targeted support, training, and mentoring for students and their faculty members within an effective learning community can help promote student success.⁵²

CONCLUSION

Online coursework offers a wealth of opportunities for students, particularly women that are above traditional age, first-generation college students, or who juggle professional and personal responsibilities outside the classroom. As distance learning classrooms become more available, they provide a chance for students to transform their identities while developing new skills. Women may particularly benefit from these experiences as their attendance in these classrooms continue to grow. A supportive classroom and instructor can foster the liminal, digital space for students to practice leadership safely and to begin viewing themselves as leaders. This development of leadership skills and identities may ultimately benefit students within their communities and professional spheres and in future academic coursework.

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⁴⁹ Michael F. Beaudoin, "Distance Education Leadership in the Context of Digital Change." *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* 16, no. 2 (2015): 33.

⁵⁰ Benson, “An Exploratory Study of Online Postsecondary”

⁵¹ Laing & Laing, “A Conceptual Framework for Evaluating Attrition in Online Courses,” para. 11

⁵² Peltier, Schibrowsky, & Drago, “The Interdependence of the Factors”

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