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"Just A Minute Sweetheart, Mom's Writing A Paper" Home, Flexible Learning, and Learning Biographies with Uneven Plots

Laura Servage
University of Alberta

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Home, Flexible Learning, and Learning Biographies
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Laura Servage
University of Alberta

Abstract: Explorations of "postmodern time," the accelerating effects of technology, and long-standing challenges of work-life balance are presented to question the impacts of online study in the home on the learning experiences of working adults. The flexibility that makes online learning appealing may have unexplored costs and consequences for the quality of learning, and the quality of family life.

Learning from home has always been an integral facet of adult education. In an era of widening Internet access and online courses, the idea of paper-based lessons being exchanged via mail, with weeks between interactions, gives an historic, far-removed air to home-based learning. For me "home study" raises specters of Antigonish fishing and farming families huddled in learning circles, or the ubiquity the International Correspondence School flyers I grew up with, each promising that with home correspondence courses, I too could become a Private Investigator or Interior Decorator.

If there is some sense of nostalgia around the notion of learning at home it may arise at least in part as an imaginative respite from the "kill or be killed" rhetoric of the present day lifelong learning agendas of industrialized countries. This competitive urgency is one factor contributing to growing numbers of adult students participating in higher education (van der Kamp, 1999; Wlodkowski, 2003). Economic policies of developed countries emphasize that workers must be prepared to continually upgrade their skills and knowledge (Arthur & Tait, 2004; Brennan, Woods, Shah & Woodley, 2000).

Alternative Delivery in Higher Education

Within this broad context of lifelong learning policies hitched to globally competitive capitalism, post-secondary education has also been significantly altered over the past thirty years by exponential growth in alternative delivery technologies and declining state support (Johnson, 1999); and by increasingly diverse student populations (Barraket, 2004; Malfroy, 2005). In recognition of these changing conditions, colleges and universities have experimented with a variety of alternative delivery formats, including online learning, satellite campuses, cohort models, and accelerated programs. Jarvis, Holfor & Griffin (2003) state that such innovations are "changing the fundamental categories of time, place and space in which learning takes place" (p. 117).

Jarvis et. al's (2003) observation points to broader considerations of the ways in which the postmodern condition of time and space compression, facilitated by technology, impact human consciousness (Dickens & Fontana, 2002; Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006). Dickens and Fontana describe postmodern time as generating often perplexing disjunctures between time as it is objectively measured, and time as it is subjectively experienced. Edwards & Usher (2001) explore the impact of postmodern time, particularly on lifelong learning. They note that while postmodernism opens a greater "multiplicity and diversity of practices of adult learning," (p.

275) it also creates "uncertainty, insecurity and ambivalence" (p. 284) in our relationships with knowledge.

The uncertainty of relationships between time, space, technology and learning has particular relevance for those who are incorporating learning from home as one among many pressing and often competing time demands. Courses delivered via the Internet are burgeoning in higher education (Odin, 2004), and are often delivered asynchronously, allowing students to participate according to their own schedules. Given that "physical presence at particular times in specific spaces is no longer central to pedagogic practice" (Edwards & Miller, p. 128), communication technologies have facilitated flexibility in learning that makes the ability to accommodate studies into already busy lives seem more within reach. The growing demand for (and availability of) distance education degree programs suggests that this is indeed the perception among providers and students alike.

Dissolving the Boundaries Between Work, Home & Learning

There is agreement that communications technologies have made the boundaries between work and home more fluid and flexible (Edwards & Usher, 2002; Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006; Tynjala, Valimaa & Sarja, 2003). Widening Internet access, and mobile, wireless technologies mean that we can – and often do – work out of the office and at irregular hours. A recent Montreal Gazette article, "The New Work Week: 24/7" describes the ways in which work has flowed out of the office and into our homes and personal lives. We work evenings and weekends, on holidays, and on our commutes to and from work (Semenak, 2007). Working from home has become more common, and home workers multi-task, negotiating paid and unpaid work in their daily routines (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006; Oznowitz, 2005).

This concept of fluid boundaries may be easily extended to include learning situations, as adult students, either by choice or necessity, opt to study at home, negotiating their learning time in ways that accommodate existing time demands of work, family, and community responsibilities. If a significant portion of adult learning is taking place at home and under complex conditions that require equally complex time and life management skills, it is worth exploring how this learning is experienced. While there appears to be a growing interest in work-life balance (Arthur & Tait, 2004; Macdonald, Phipps & Lethbridge, 2005), the impacts of continuing education have not been considered in the equation. Aligning with Dickens & Fontana's assertion that our subjective experiences of "postmodern time" have not received adequate empirical attention (2002), Arthur & Tait note that little is known about "how adults manage time constraints whilst working and studying in private or public organizations" (2004, p. 223).

Research on work life balance suggests that time constraints and the negotiation of multiple roles in the home present genuine challenges. The currency and urgency of this issue is addressed in Duxbury & Higgin's extensive report on work-life balance for Canadians (2003). Double income families with children are likely to experience significant time pressures (Brannen, 2005; Larson & Sanne, 2005), and "cross-over stress" when one spouse experiences the effects of the others' work-related stress (MacDonald, Phipps & Lethbridge, 2005). Brannen (2005) Osnowitz (2005) and Kaufman-Scarborough (2006) describe families experiencing constant states of busy-ness as they juggle paid labour, domestic work, and childcare. Higher income workers are bearing the burden of longer hours, and an intensification of their work: there is the general expectation that we should be able to get more work done in less time (Brannen, 2005). Lower-income families face their own forms of time-related stress in that they

are more likely to work shifts, and are less able able to afford some of the conveniences – like fast food or private transportation – that make the pace and complexity of life more manageable (Macdonald, Phipps & Lethbridge, 2005).

All Alone in the World: Post-Modernity & Reflexivity

Thrown into a vast open sea with no navigation charts and all the marker buoys sunk and barely visible, we have only two choices left : we may rejoice in the breath-taking vistas of new discoveries – or we may tremble out of fear of drowning. (Baumann, 1998).

The challenges of working families to meet their many needs – economic, relational, and self-actualizing – brings "down to earth" our more abstract and theoretical wrangling with the changing nature of our subjective experiences of time. The sense of postmodern time as accelerated and fragmented (Dickens & Fontana, 2002) is manifest in the unremarkable everydayness of our time management efforts, and these efforts remain, for the most part, privatized. Larsson & Sanne (2005) attribute a ubiquity of self-help books on time management to a broad social experience of an accelerated pace of life, and the "modern understanding…that the individual is responsible for managing his or her own life, rather that falling back on traditional patterns of action" (p. 213).

This understanding is grounded in the reflexive modernity described by Giddens and Beck (Beck, 1994), wherein traditional norms, supports, institutions, and constraints on individual choices have ebbed away. Extending this idea in relation to lifelong learning, Edwards & Usher (2002) assert that the discourses and conditions of postmodernism – skepticism of intellectual authority, and valuing fluidity and change over mastery – "reflects and contributes to a breakdown and reinscription in different forms of clear and settled demarcations between different sectors of education and between education and life"(p. 276).

This state of heightened individualism, referred to variously as a facet of postmodernism (Edwards & Usher, 2002), or reflexive modernity (Beck, 1994) leaves the individual faced with a dizzying array of life choices. Each of us, state Edward & Miller (2000) are tasked to develop our own "learning biographies," combining work, formal learning, and informal learning in such ways as to create unique trajectories of lifelong learning. While Edwards & Miller recognize that with autonomy and individualism may come a "crisis of identity," the authors ultimately downplay the idea of "crisis" choosing for the most part to "rejoice in the breathtaking vistas" offered by the postmodern work and learning landscape. And, there are some indications that our authoring of ourselves through work and learning carries some psychic rewards that may offset the existential angst generated by postmodern untetherings (Brannen, 2005; Jackson & Jordan, 2000; Larsson & Sanne, 2005).

The Promise of "Flexible Learning?"

Although Edwards & Miller draw some welcome, positive attention the creative and empowering possibilities of learning across multiple disciplines and contexts, unbounded by time, space, and to some extent academic tradition, they do not, I believe, sufficiently problematize the challenges posed by this self-authored learning. First, the authors fail to ask, as do Jackson & Jordan (2000) whether lifelong learning lives up to its rhetorical promise of benefiting individuals as much as it does corporate "end users." Second, and more within the contexts of this discussion, the authors fail to contextualize individual learning trajectories within what are in fact very complex matrices of social institutions and relationships. Nowhere, perhaps,

do these forces come together more succinctly than in the time negotiations of working, learning, and care-giving adults.

"Flexibility" appears to be a solution of sorts, and is lauded by Edwards & Miller as a postmodern virtue. Communications technologies have facilitated such flexibility by "compressing" time and space (Dickens & Fontana, 2002) in such a way that many of us are often able to multi-task paid and unpaid labour. Fluid boundaries between home and work may also be extended, as Edwards & Miller (2002) and others have observed, to include learning no longer affixed to bricks-and-mortar campuses. Given the challenges of work-life balance, it is not terribly surprising that the flexibility of online learning takes on appeal. Indeed, learning "anytime, anywhere" is a selling feature of distance delivery programs (see Athabasca University, 2006; University of Phoenix Online, 2007).

Flexibility, however, carries with it a significant paradox, for where flexible scheduling is perceived positively as a coping strategy (Brannen, 2005; Duxbury & Higgins, 2003; Larsson & Sannes, 2005), it also appears suspect in creating the very endless permutations of life choices it offers to manage. Is flexibility a postmodern disease, or a cure? We are left to wonder on the extent to which flexibility creates some of the very stress it is supposed to be addressing.

"Flexibility" may thus be Janus-faced – an at times duplicitous deity that does not always reveal the costs of the convenience it appears to offer. First among the costs may be the quality of family life. Excessive busy-ness has a negative impact on the quality of family relationships and time spent with family members (Larsson & Sanne, 2005). Studies of time and labour distributions in families point to stressors created by role conflicts, wherein the demands of one role impinge directly on the demands of other roles (Hecht, 2001). The consequences of excessive "busyness" for health are well documented (Macdonal Phipps & Lethbridge, 2005); less time devoted to exercise, sleep, and leisure activities leads to stress related illnesses.

Thus there are prices to be paid, it seems, for the freedom we have to create our own "learning biographies" through paid and unpaid labour, and learning. "Feminist economists," state MacDonald Phipps & Lethbridge, "argue that macro policies, such as cutbacks in health and social services, have assumed an infinite capacity on the part of households to absorb the costs of reproduction" (2005, p. 65). Similarly, we might conceptualize "lifelong learning" at the level of the household, as an unpaid labour burden. While it is recognized that the responsibility of ongoing learning and training has been shifted to the individual (Cruikshank, 2005), this tends to be represented in terms of time and monetary costs. Hidden and hence unconsidered are the opportunity costs of learning in terms of family life. As learning is increasingly privatized, taking place at home in front of computer screens, its impacts on family life are similarly removed from public spaces and public discourses.

The "flexibility" of alternative and online learning also has some potentially troubling implications for the quality of what we call "learning." Brannen's (2005) case studies of working families' negotiations of home and workplace boundaries suggest that many of us are living in an "extended present," a state in which "constant…busyness leaves little time or space to contemplate what lies beyond the present. It not only stops people from imagining the future; it stops them from doing anything about it or creating changes in the future" (p. 117). Larsson & Sanne(2005) offer that effective life management strategies involve "an instrumental and self-controlled attitude. Spontaneity as well as the capacity to give time an intrinsic value may suffer" (p. 227). In short, learning for liberal or emancipatory ends may be much less possible under the potentially harried conditions of learning at home. It is possible that home learning may

contribute to the more instrumentalized forms of learning already far too privileged in discourses of lifelong learning.

While it is Luddite-like to dismiss all distance learning technology out of hand, it is very possible that traditional classroom and seminar formats at least create a space where students are able to suspend the other commitments in their lives long enough to engage more deeply with their learning. Where such spaces cannot be created – namely in distance education programs where the bulk of students' learning takes place at home – the processes of learning may be compromised by the sorts of multi-tasking and fragmenting that seem to characterize our efforts to manage conflicting and voluminous demands on time. Brannen (2005) makes a distinction between commodified time and a "moral economy of time" wherein time flows freely, and processes are valued over ends. Ideally, this is the time that characterizes our social relationships. One might extend such idealism to time spent learning: that such activity is also guided not by commodified time but by the same unbounded care and attention that we wish to devote to all meaningful aspects of our lives.

Considerations for Further Study

It is clear that online learning has become an enormous presence in higher education, and it is likely that learning from home will continue to be a mainstay of continuing education. The flexibility it affords is attractive for its ability to facilitate the sorts of independent learning trajectories that characterize reflexive modernity However, the actual conditions under which home learning take place remain, for the most part, a black box. This has implications for pedagogy, but perhaps even more importantly for the political economy of lifelong learning. By considering online learning against the backdrop of time management and role management in families, we may recognize that the costs of lifelong learning being downloaded upon the individual potentially extend beyond time and money, into the less measurable realm of opportunity costs experienced in our interpersonal relationships and personal well-being.

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