STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND:
RURAL LEARNERS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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G.B.
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the ways in which distance education is experienced by adult learners situated in rural communities. The study was conducted in a mountainous region of British Columbia where many small communities are undergoing a transition in their economic base. In this context, many adults seek additional education or new skill development and view distance education as a way to acquire a credential without leaving the community.

Eleven distance learners were interviewed for this study. The resultant interview transcripts were analyzed using a grounded theory process. Although the interview participants varied considerably in terms of their age, prior educational experience, and distance programme enrolment, they all reported some degree of isolation and a pervasive sense of foreignness to the distance learning experience. An analysis of the research suggests that a rural community context influences distance learners in three ways: in their impetus for taking a distance programme, in their experience while taking it, and in the impact of the learning venture on other aspects of their lives.

This thesis concludes with implications for distance education practice and recommendations for those who administer programmes, plan curriculum, and support distance learners. The study has particular relevance for distance education practitioners whose delivery mandate includes adult learners situated in non-metropolitan communities.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .............................................................................................................. i

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS....................................................................................... ii

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION .................................................................</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background ..........................................................</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem and Purpose for this Study..........................</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope and Limitations ........................................</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methodology .........................................</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions .................................................</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms ...........................................</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan of Presentation ...........................................</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning in the Context of the Community ........</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of Community ................................</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Affects the Community ........................</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Community Affects Education .....................</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Education in Rural Communities ...............</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining “Rural” .................................................</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges of Rurality ........................................</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patterns of Learning in Rural Communities ..........</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Development for Rural Communities ..</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extension Education ........................................</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance Education .............................................</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and Scope of Distance Education ............</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of distance education ....................</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories of distance education ..........................</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The distance learner ..........................................</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology in Distance Education .......................</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access or barrier? ................................................</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other issues in the use of technology ................</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance Education for Rural Learners ...............</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance learners in rural and remote communities</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The potential for distance education ................</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of the Literature ...................................</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. THE INTERVIEW PROCESS AND FINDINGS.................................................. 54
   Planning and Implementation................................................................. 54
   Planning the Interviews......................................................................... 54
   Implementing the Interviews................................................................. 56
   The Flow of a Typical Interview............................................................ 57
   Data Analysis......................................................................................... 58
   Participants' Views of their Communities............................................... 62
   Geographical Location............................................................................ 62
   Communities of Practice......................................................................... 63
   Rural Community Benefits and Problems............................................. 64
   The Perceived Role of Education for Adults in Resource-Based,
     Non-Metropolitan Communities........................................................ 66
   Current Community Attitudes towards Education................................. 68
   The Value of Credentialling in the Community...................................... 69
   The Impetus for Undertaking a Formal Learning Program by Distance... 70
     Professional Growth............................................................................. 71
     Personal Growth................................................................................... 72
     No Other Alternative............................................................................ 73
     Cost and Accessibility.......................................................................... 74
   “Doing It”: The Learning Venture.......................................................... 76
     Feelings of Alienation......................................................................... 76
     Isolation and Communication.............................................................. 77
       Alone in the primary community....................................................... 77
       Alone in the academic community.................................................... 79
     Feelings of Isolation............................................................................ 83
     Importance of communication with the instructor............................... 85
     Importance of communications technologies..................................... 86
   Issues about Curriculum and Academic Work....................................... 87
   Time and Structure.................................................................................. 89
   Advantages to Being a Distance Student................................................. 91
   The Impact on the Learner’s Career and Other Aspects of Life............ 92
     Impact on Professional Life................................................................. 92
     Impact on Personal Life....................................................................... 94
     Impact on the Community.................................................................... 96

4. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.................. 98
   Adult Learning in Rural Communities and Communities of Practice...... 98
   Distance Learning Experience................................................................ 101
   Community and Communication........................................................... 102
   Conflicts and Border Pedagogy............................................................... 104
   Issues not Unique to Rurality?................................................................. 105
   Impacts and Outcomes of the Distance Learning Experience............... 106
   Personal Reflection................................................................................. 108
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, the number of educational opportunities available by distance has increased enormously. New communications tools, including videoconferencing and internet technologies, have been widely adopted by educational institutions to develop virtual learning communities among their online learners. Because of the *anytime, anywhere* promise that distance education offers, this form of delivery suggests great potential for expanding educational access to adults in non-metropolitan communities. However, many – if not most – distance education programmes are not designed specifically to meet the needs of rural residents, and do not acknowledge the unique communities in which learners in rural areas are already immersed.

As a ruraly situated distance learner and as a faculty supporter of electronic learning and distance education initiatives at a small community college, I wanted to explore the ways in which distance learning is experienced by rural learners. This thesis is an account of my effort to answer the question: What is the relationship between a rural community context and the distance learning experience?

My intent in writing this thesis is to contribute to the field of adult education in two ways. First, I hope to provide useful information about the distance learning experience from the perspective of learners in rural community contexts,
especially for distance learning practitioners with no direct rural experience.

Second, I hope to encourage those who plan or administer distance programmes to look beyond the virtual when considering ways of fortifying a sense of community in distance education offerings.

**Background**

During the summer of 1980, I was employed by the Nova Scotia Department of Fisheries. The most interesting part of my job involved travelling to the various fish-landing sites in Lunenburg County and measuring the catch. One group of islanders was, by far, the most intriguing group of fishermen I met. Quiet-spoken but articulate, they worked together and often brought in the largest haul. My co-worker explained that long ago, one of the islanders spent some time on the mainland and there met and married a schoolteacher, who returned with him to the island. Later, her friend (also a teacher) came over and married the brother of the first man.

This inauspicious coincidence completely altered the culture of the community, which became one of the first islands to have its own school. Two families of schoolteachers in a small island community exerted a powerful influence: there was, of course, never a disruption in schooling for the children, and the entire island came to value education quite highly. I learned that all of the children of the fishermen I met (three generations later) either had attended, or were currently attending, post-secondary institutions.
It was 10 years later before I had the opportunity to actually visit the island. By this time, there were only three of the original families left; the other dozen or so houses were occupied by summer visitors from Halifax or New England. When I spoke with one of the fishermen, he explained that the children had all found good jobs elsewhere. None of them had wanted to return, with their post-secondary diploma or degree, to fish. They had been educated right off the island. The little schoolhouse was boarded up and the rural island community was gone.

That island visit started me thinking about some of the big issues in rural community development. I wondered: What keeps people in a community? Could this island community have been sustained? If the young people had returned not to fish, what could they have done? I wondered, too, about the role of education in all of this. Clearly, learning situated within the community can have profound effects; learning situated outside the community can have effects that are equally profound but not as sustaining for community life. How can a community ethic or culture of continuing education be nurtured? What kinds of education strengthen the community and what kinds erode (perhaps unintentionally) the fabric of rural community life?

Over the years I have become more and more aware of the subtle (and not-so-subtle) relationships between the community and the educational systems that operate within it. My philosophy has changed: I no longer see education as merely a means of self-development and personal growth. Education changes
communities, and communities change education. If you do not understand the community, you can not begin to understand what education will do to the community.

I still feel wistful when I remember my visit to that island, or whenever I visit a community in decline. I have lived in rural communities for most of my life and I am intimately aware of the plusses and minuses of a rural lifestyle. In my experience, rural cultures are different – and more varied – than urban ones. These small communities provide us all with a reservoir of examples of different ways of living together.

The fishery collapsed in Nova Scotia only a few years after my island visit. Small coastal communities everywhere in the province suffered as a result. The corresponding economic slump and increase in unemployment were the main reasons that my family and I left Nova Scotia and moved to western Canada. And although employment options and the economy in general are better in this part of the country, I see a familiar pattern in the rural communities here in the East Kootenay region of British Columbia, where I now live. Most small communities in this region are dependent upon the primary industries of forestry or mining. As global economic changes trickle down into these mountain valleys, mines are closed and mills are shut down. Residents of rural communities realize – sometimes almost overnight – the need to diversify. To revitalize the community and help it to evolve into something else, new skills are needed: but which ones? And from where?
Distance education is a powerful option enabling rural residents to remain in their communities while pursuing a variety of educational opportunities. But I know from considerable personal experience that this is neither an automatic nor easy solution to the growing development needs of rural communities. There are thousands of high-quality distance, distributed and self-paced educational opportunities available to adult learners today; however, research indicates that most distance learners will be unsuccessful without comprehensive support services. Many rural communities lack a strong learning culture and rural residents may lack the literacy skills required to function in such a self-directed educational environment.

My work at College of the Rockies (the principal public post-secondary provider for the East Kootenay region) has evolved a great deal over the last 5 years, reflecting changing needs in the college community and the community at large. Formally, I provide support for faculty who are developing new on-line courses in response to the enormous growth in provincial distance education. Informally, I also coordinate learning support for distance students throughout the region. My work offers me a unique opportunity to help make distance education “work” for these rural communities. To do this well, I feel I must first understand the region’s distance learners and their community contexts for learning.

**Problem and Purpose for this Study**
Although distance education offers great potential for adult learners in rural communities, it introduces additional challenges. For example, rural residents face not only a learning experience that may not be designed with their unique needs in mind; they also face a learning environment with a higher attrition rate than occurs in most classroom-based offerings (Saba, 2000; Zeeb, 2000). Distance learners may miss the familiar environment of the classroom and frequent, direct contact with a cohort of peers. Most distance education institutions recognize that a sense of community is important to the learning process: a prevalent theme in recent literature examines how to strengthen the sense of community in on-line learning environments (Roberts & Keough, 1995; Svensson, 1998). However, in most of the literature related to distance education, such challenges are defined and explored from the perspective of the institution and its traditional, residential student paradigm (e.g., see Phillips & Peters, 1999). The problem is that this approach to distance learning does not acknowledge the unique community situations in which rural learners are immersed.

In this study, I sought to explore the issue of community from a different perspective – to investigate not “how can we better bring the distance learner into the academic community?” but instead “how can we design distance education so that it better fits within the learner’s existing community life?” This latter question opens a large, unexplored corner in the field of distance education. The purpose of this thesis is to answer a more preliminary question in
this discussion: What is the relationship between a learner’s primary community and the distance learning experience? I conducted interviews with rural distance learners as a way to identify how the distance education experience is influenced within a particular primary community environment.

**Scope and Limitations**

This project was limited geographically to the southeastern corner of British Columbia, commonly called the East Kootenay region. This region is quite sparsely populated, with a number of small hamlets and towns scattered between extensive mountain ranges (see Figure 1). The largest urban centre in the region is Cranbrook, with a population of about 18,000. The closest metropolitan area (Calgary) is in the next province, a 4-hour drive when the roads are good. The highway to the closest metropolitan area in this province covers more than 500 kilometres and includes three mountain passes.

All participants in this study were residents of non-metropolitan communities whose economies are based on primary industry resources. Although this type of community is typical of many Canadian non-metropolitan communities, it is not representative of all.

Figure 1: The study area: southeastern corner of British Columbia
The selection of participants was also limited, for the most part, to those who were currently taking or had completed at least one distance course. Residents who dropped out of a programme early, or who had considered distance education and decided not to enroll, did not constitute a large part of this study. Consequently, the results of this study are most relevant to rural distance learners and may not be applicable to urban distance learners or to rural learners engaged in more traditional forms of educational delivery.

An interviewing process formed the primary tool of investigation for this study. This process was limited by a number of factors. Questions concerning the distance education experience in general were not explored in depth, as
interview discussion focussed mainly on the distance learning experience within the context of the learner’s primary community. Although each participant was given the opportunity to correct his or her interview transcript, no extensive follow-up interviews were conducted. The resultant data were analyzed using a qualitative process (grounded theory); no quantitative analysis was attempted. Participants were selected based largely on matters of convenience and willingness to participate.

**Research Methodology**

The research followed a grounded theory approach. This methodology (described by Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was introduced as an alternative to the more structured, quantitative forms of inquiry commonly used for social science research at that time. The essence of grounded theory is “the discovery of theory from data” (p. 1), and the concept that new theory *emerges* from data collection. Grounded theory is now a well-established methodology for conducting research in the social sciences, especially for a practice-oriented field like adult education:

> Given its focus on generation of theory from data collected in the field, it seems ideally suited for adult education, a discipline which is characterized by its lack of a well-developed theoretical foundation and a strong commitment to the world of practice. Grounded theory not only offers adult educators a time-honoured qualitative research strategy as an alternative approach to more traditional methods of investigation, but provides a viable means for scholars and practitioners to generate theory grounded in the realities of their daily work. (Babchuk, 1997, Conclusion section, para. 1)
Over the years Glaser and Strauss have diverged considerably in their interpretation and practice of the grounded theory approach (Babchuk, 1997). Glaser has continued to promote a highly flexible, emergent approach to research analysis, whereas Strauss has advocated a more rigorous approach and the application of a somewhat structured framework to analyze results. Because so little theory currently exists in the field of distance education, I decided that Glaser’s more emergent approach would be better suited to my research question.

Regardless of which grounded theory approach is used, data are gathered in qualitative ways, sometimes involving documentary materials, fiction, and other research – but most often through direct interviews (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 115). The researcher notes key issues in each interview, and compares these issues with issues in subsequent interviews. As general themes (or categories) emerge, the researcher begins to identify the properties of each theme. Dick (2000, Sampling section, para. 2) recommends that the researcher then challenge these themes by selecting additional interview opportunities that will add diversity to the research sample. As the themes and their properties are either verified or refuted, the researcher identifies emergent patterns in the data, which are then tested by the research process until the trend seems clear. Because I wanted to learn about rural learners’ direct experience with distance education, I decided to use interviews to elicit most of the information I sought.
Assumptions

My overarching assumptions in this thesis are that rural communities are different from urban ones, that a rural way of life is worth sustaining, and that education situated in the community can help to sustain community culture.

I began this research project with the hunch that distance programme non-completion in rural communities was largely a time commitment issue: I suspected that most distance programmes required a time commitment so heavy that learners felt their other community commitments were compromised. As learners are “pulled in” by the demands of the academic community, they may feel “pulled out” of their home communities. The resultant tension, I suspected, could pressure some learners to abandon their distance education plans.

Although my fundamental assumptions about rural living and education have not changed, some of my assumptions specific to distance education were challenged as a result of this research. These assumptions and challenges are compared with the literature and discussed in light of my findings in Chapter 4.

Definition of Terms

Primary community is used in this thesis to mean the people with whom one communicates on a regular basis. Dunbar (1996), a primatologist, determined that for humans this communicatively close group of people numbers approximately 150 individuals, which is “the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind of relationship that
goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us” (Chap. 8, para. 14).

In this thesis, the primary community includes the participant’s home (residential) community and communities of practice.

*Home community* is defined as the hamlet, band, village, town, city or region that one customarily refers to as “home” and where one currently resides.

A *community of practice* is a formal or informal group of people who share common goals and interests. Most people belong to a number of such groups, “at work, at school, at home, in our hobbies” (Wenger, 1998, Section 2, para. 1).

*Border pedagogy* describes the process of learning in the often-contested border areas where communities of practice overlap. The concept of border pedagogy acknowledges “the shifting borders that both undermine and reterritorialise different configurations of culture, power and knowledge” (Giroux, 1991, p. 509).

Within a collection of people who communicate regularly, *communicative space* refers to the amount of time or the frequency of discussion that may be considered acceptable around a particular topic or issue.

A *non-metropolitan community* is defined as a hamlet, band, village, town or region situated outside the commuting zone of a Census Metropolitan Area. A Census Metropolitan Area is defined by Statistics Canada (in Tremblay, 2001) as an area with an urban core of 100,000 or over and including all neighbouring municipalities where 50 percent or more of the work force commutes into the
urban core. In this report, the terms *non-metropolitan* and *rural* are used interchangeably.

*Distance education* refers to a structured course or programme of study in which teacher and learner are usually separated by a distance. Distance education takes place outside a traditional classroom arrangement and necessitates the use of some sort of communications technology to effect interaction and content delivery. In this thesis, the terms *distance education* and *distance learning* are used interchangeably.

**Plan of Presentation**

This thesis is organized into four chapters: an introduction, a review of the literature, a description of the study, and a discussion and conclusion. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature, primarily in the areas of community-situated adult learning and distance education. Examples relevant to rural communities are chosen whenever possible, in order to provide a focussed theoretical context for the research that follows.

Chapter 3 describes the process used to carry out the research as well as the resultant research findings. These results are presented in four subsections, corresponding to community perceptions and the three broad types of interaction I discovered between learners’ communities and their distance learning experience: the impetus for learning, the learning venture itself while underway, and the impact of the experience afterwards. Chapter 4 consists of an analysis and interpretation
of the research outcomes. This chapter begins with a discussion of the relationship between participants’ communities and their distance learning experience. These research results are further discussed in relation to other research and established theories in the field. A summary of the grounded theory generated by this research project follows. The results of this research are relevant to the work I currently do; consequently, implications for my practice are described. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the overall significance of this study and recommendations for distance programme design and delivery in adult education.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adult education includes a great diversity of practice. Practices can be differentiated by their philosophical orientation, type of curriculum, learner audience, or learning environment. The focus of this thesis is adult education as it is experienced in the learning environment of the community. There are many kinds of community-based education, but in this study my exploration is limited to the ways in which distance learning is experienced in rural communities. In this chapter, I first review literature relating to the community as a context for learning. A history and overview of adult education in rural communities follows. Because extension education has been so important to rural communities, I include a subsection on that specialty. Next, I review distance education,
including theoretical perspectives, technological aspects, and information sources that link distance education to learning in small communities.

The literature selected represents mostly recent sources: literature within the last 10 years for community learning, and literature within the last 5 years for distance education (which has changed so dramatically over even this recent timespan). Most of the research reviewed was conducted in North America; Canadian sources have been used wherever possible. Because I am a rural learner, situated far from an academic library, internet resources have been used extensively, although limited (for the most part) to academic sources, such as: university research collections, refereed on-line journals, conference proceedings, and government publications.

**Learning in the Context of the Community**

Much of the literature connecting the roles of community and adult education highlights models of education for improving the quality of the community. Far fewer sources recognize the converse: that aspects of the community can affect the quality of educational experiences for its members.

In this section I examine the interaction between adult learning and community from both perspectives. Learning communities, community-based learning, and community education provide examples of how education affects the community. The concepts of communities of practice and border pedagogy
provide models for ways in which the community affects the learning experience of adults. Before beginning to explore how adults learn within the community, however, I examine just what a community is.

**Definitions of Community**

The word *community* is used extensively within adult education literature – often uncritically and without definition. In *The Foundations of Adult Education in Canada* (Selman & Dampier, 1991), for example, community is used as an adjective to indicate the nature of colleges and schools as well as for a movement, a type of development, and a form of education – but in no instance is the concept of community defined.

Interestingly, I was able to locate robust, clear definitions for community from the disparate fields of primatology, business, and religion. In primatology, for example, Dunbar (1996) offers interesting insights into the origins of human communities. He studied the role of grooming and the size of the supportive social group for about two dozen species of primates. He notes that primates who live in relatively large social groups have larger neocortical areas of the brain and devote more time to grooming each other than do species with smaller group sizes. Dunbar postulates that the increased neocortex enables the maintenance of a larger social group. He is able to extrapolate his data to predict an optimum group size for humans of about 150 individuals. However, Dunbar emphasizes the “genuinely social relationship” (Chap. 4, para. 16) inherent in
such a grouping and is careful to differentiate this from a more artificial grouping, like a city. Dunbar proposes that language evolved among humans to replace the social grooming necessary to keep the social group bonded; he believes that verbal communication provided a more efficient way to fulfill the grooming role in humans’ larger social group. The community that Dunbar implies is a relatively generic entity, biologically-based but maintained through regular communication.

In *The Community of the Future*, Hesselbein, Goldsmith, Beckhard, and Schubert (1998) present a variety of highly individualistic concepts of community. A unique group of corporate executives, consultants, authors, non-profit executives, and politicians contribute ideas that collectively produce a broad overview about what community means. Each contributor develops a particular aspect of community and provides (explicitly or implicitly) a concomitant definition of community. Contributors often attempt to refine their definitions by identifying what a community is not: a community is not the same thing as a society (p. 6), a neighbourhood (p. 84), or a cult (p. 164). In general, however, most contributors support the notion that a community is a group of individuals who share a common interest.

James Barksdale, past president and chief executive officer at Netscape Communications, is one of the contributors. Writing mostly about business organizations, Barksdale (1998) illustrates a convincing connection between the evolution of modern communities and the need for communication: “given the slow and arduous challenge of communication, [a] hierarchy was the most
efficient and effective model for organizational change” (p. 94). Given the current standards of literacy and options in communications, he reasons, the traditional hierarchical structures in communities – especially organizational communities – are no longer necessary or even productive. Like the primatologist Dunbar, Barksdale sees communities as largely defined by their patterns of communication.

Smith (2001) discusses the definition of community from the perspectives of sociology, politics, and religion. He notes that community is also a value (and could be associated with a sense of fraternity or fellowship), and emphasizes the close association between community and communion (“a profound meeting or encounter – not just with other people, but also with God and creation” [Section 2, para. 6]). He concludes this philosophical discussion with a query about the relationship between education and community and ponders which came first: “Can we educate for community without being in community?” (Section 8, para. 1). The relationship between adult education and the community is further discussed in the following two sections.

**Education Affects the Community**

Adult education affects the community in a wide variety of ways. Brookfield (1984), even though he does not define community *per se*,
categorizes community adult education processes with a three-fold typology: (a) adult education for the community refers to traditional, consumer-driven programming; (b) adult education in the community describes extension-type education that is not necessarily confined to school buildings; and (c) adult education of the community refers to those processes that move the community toward a somewhat predetermined goal conceived inside the educator’s head (p. 84).

Education and community are clearly connected in the concept of a learning community. Learning communities are well developed in two distinct ways within the adult education literature. American educators use the term primarily to refer to a relationship between courses (Kellogg, 1999), but Canadian educators use the term in a more general sense to refer to a specific type of relationship between learners and an educator. Laferrière, Breuleux, Bracewell, and Erickson (1998), are part of a research team for Technology for Advanced Collaborative Teaching (attached to the University of Laval) which actively promotes learning communities. One of the essential components they have adopted to define the learning community is “a group of students and at least one educator who, for a while and motivated by common vision and will, are engaged in the pursuit of acquiring knowledge, abilities and proper attitudes” (Section 1, para. 2). This definition is in line with Brookfield’s concept of adult education in the community. Regardless of how it is defined, however, a learning
community is generally identified in the literature as a construct of a recognized educational system.

Community-based learning is a term which, at first, suggests a form of learning firmly rooted in the community. Indeed, this learning model does describe learning that occurs in communities outside academic institutions. However, like learning communities, most community-based learning initiatives detailed in the literature are based in formal educational institutions and include the delivery of institutionally organized educational programmes. Owens and Wang (1996), for example, use the term “as a broad framework that includes service-learning, experiential learning, School-to-Work, youth apprenticeship, lifelong learning and other types” (Section 2, para. 1). The focus of community-based learning is primarily to provide community involvement as a form of enrichment for institution-based students, as Thorme (n.d.) explains on Princeton University’s Community Based Learning Initiative website:

Community-based learning enriches coursework by encouraging students to apply the knowledge and analytic tools gained in the classroom to the pressing issues that affect local communities. Working with faculty members and community leaders, students develop research projects, collect and analyze data, and share their results and conclusions with the organizations and agencies that need the information, as well as with their professors. Not only does the community benefit, but students’ understanding of the subject is also greatly enhanced. (para. 2)

Like the term community, community education is another term with multiple meanings. Selman and Dampier (1991) state that the purpose of community education is to “work for change and improvement in community life”
The Canadian Association for Community Education’s website defines community education more precisely:

[Community education is] a process whereby learning is used for both individual and community betterment. It is characterized by: involvement of people of all ages; the use of community learning, resources and research to bring about community change, and; the recognition that people can learn through, with and for each other to create a better world. (Section 2)

Such definitions correlate well with Brookfield’s concept of adult education for the community. However, after a rough survey of sites on the internet, I found that the most common use of the term community education is as the name of the department within colleges or school boards that offers non-credit programming to the community.

Community education and community development are often found together in the literature (e.g., see Faris & Peterson, 2000, and University of Guelph School of Rural Extension Studies Homepage, n. d.). Selman and Dampier (1991) do not emphasize the similarity in terminology, but nevertheless provide highly similar descriptions for these two activities. According to Selman and Dampier, many community educators “wish to relate their programs to forces working for change and improvement in community life” (p. 6), and community development “is usually seen as a process by which members of a community, however defined, determine to take stock of their community, set goals for desirable change, and work towards those goals” (p. 9). The two activities, however, are fundamentally different in their impetus: whereas community
education is initiated and organized by clearly identified community educators, community development is usually initiated by diverse groups within the community. The topic of community development is further reviewed in a subsequent section titled “Adult Education in Rural Communities.”

The Community Affects Education

Although much of the literature connecting adult education with communities refers to the community as a geographically located entity, Lave and Wenger (1991) propose a model that locates learning in a more abstract sort of community. They argue that most learning takes place beyond the classroom, within the social contexts of day-to-day activity and work. They propose that learning must be situated within such authentic contexts in order for it to be appropriately applied:

Knowing a general rule by itself in no way assures that any generality it may carry is enabled in the specific circumstances in which it is relevant. In this sense, any “power of abstraction” is thoroughly situated, in the lives of persons and in the culture that makes it possible. (p. 34)

This situated learning is reminiscent of traditional apprenticeship models; in fact, Lave and Wenger state that the original intention of their study was to “rescue the idea of apprenticeship” (p. 29). Using the apprenticeship analogy, the group of practitioners (from newcomers to experts) from which the new apprentice can learn the skills of the trade constitute a community of practice. Lave and Wenger define the community of practice in more generalized (although somewhat
vague) terms, as “a set of relations among persons, activity, and the world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 98). Newcomers move directionally within this community of practice, entering the community in a zone of legitimate peripheral participation and gradually moving inwards as they acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes characteristic of the community.

The communities of practice concept has been widely adopted by others in a variety of fields, and its meaning has been adapted in the process. Imel (2001), for example, provides a survey of the ways in which the communities of practice model has been applied in not only adult education, but also training and development, business, and management. Wenger (1998) provides an updated (and more readily understandable) description of communities of practice in the following excerpt:

Communities of practice are everywhere. We all belong to a number of them – at work, at school, at home, in our hobbies. Some have a name, some don’t. We are core members of some and we belong to others more peripherally. You may be a member of a band, or you may just come to rehearsals to hang around with the group. You may lead a group of consultants who specialize in telecommunication strategies, or you may just stay in touch to keep informed about developments in the field. Or you may have just joined a community and are still trying to find your place in it. Whatever form our participation takes, most of us are familiar with the experience of belonging to a community of practice. (Section 2, para. 1)

Giroux (1991) explores community cultures from a radically different perspective. Instead of describing the ways in which learners acquire power
within a community of practice, Giroux emphasizes the importance of learning in the often-contested border areas, where different cultures overlap, and uses the term *border pedagogy* to describe this learning process. For Giroux, the concept of border pedagogy acknowledges “the shifting borders that both undermine and reterritorialise different configurations of culture, power and knowledge” (p. 509). Like Lave and Wenger, Giroux emphasizes the social and highly situated nature of learning, but he stresses that a primary purpose of education is to prepare learners to cross the borders between cultures rather than to move from the periphery of a community towards the centre.

Heaney (1995) provides a unique synthesis of these two ideas. He uses the concepts of situated learning and border pedagogy as lenses to bring a number of adult education ethical issues into focus, and identifies the ethical dangers inherent in a community of practice model:

> Learning should lead from peripheral to fuller participation – strengthening our influence and decision-making power within a given community of practice. Structures for peripheral participation – one of which is workplace education and training – may, on the other hand, serve to keep learners on the edges, reinforcing the dominance of old timers in a field over the encroaching aspirations of newcomers. (Section 6, para. 1)

Heaney argues that border pedagogy is *the* work of adult educators; that the most important role of the adult educator is to support adult learners in their difficult and sometimes politically charged journey into the community:

> The most intensive and potentially productive adult learning is situated on the edges of communities of practice – at contested sites subject to the competing claims of intersecting communities. . . . The aim of learning on
the edge is in each instance to become more fully involved in inventing the
discourse which defines the field. (Section 4, para. 3)

The concept of a community of practice provides a model for viewing education
as not only situated within the community but also reciprocally affected by it.
Heaney’s synthesis adds to the model by offering praxis guidelines for adult
educators in community practice.

As a context for learning and a value so deep it is usually accepted
uncritically, the community is an essential partner in any educational venture.
The rural community, with its unique geographical, cultural and economic
features, provides a special context for adult learning.
Adult Education in Rural Communities

The history of adult education in Canada has been distinguished by its outstanding projects in rural communities. Selman and Dampier (1991), in describing how adult education was adapted to the uniquely Canadian context, cite the “Antigonish Movement, National Farm Radio Forum, the Women’s Institutes, Frontier College, [and] the National Film Board” (p. 44) – each of which developed major initiatives for primarily rural communities. Over the past hundred years, however, the proportion of Canadians living in rural areas has decreased considerably; now most Canadians are urban dwellers. Adult education in Canada reflects this trend. A visit to the website for the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) reveals that most papers accepted for presentation at the 2001 National Conference are not obviously related to the unique concerns of Canadian rural learners. The problems of rural communities have become the exception rather than the standard for many Canadian studies.
In this section I first examine definitions and challenges of rurality, then provide an overview of how adults learn, formally and informally, in rural communities. Community development, as a process by which a significant aspect of the community undergoes change, is briefly reviewed next. This section concludes with a review of the literature relating to a particular type of adult education with historical and cultural importance for rural communities: extension education.

**Defining Rural**

Coming up with an adequate definition of rural is a problem in itself. Tremblay (2001), a statistician with Statistics Canada, attempts to formalize the rural community with an almost indecipherable definition:

RST [Rural and Small Town Canada] refers to the population living outside the commuting zones of larger urban centres (LUC) – specifically, outside Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) and Census of Agglomerations (CAs). A CMA has an urban core of 100,000 or over and includes all neighbouring municipalities where 50 percent or more of the work force commutes into the urban core. A CA has an urban core of 10,000 to 99,999 and includes all neighbouring municipalities where 50 percent or more of the work force commutes into the urban core. Thus, RST Canada represents the non-CMA and non-CA population. (p. 3)

Hill and Moore (2000), however, point out the changing concept of the rural community and note that the differences between rural and urban areas have become harder to distinguish: urban sprawl effectually brings the city into rural communities and rural residents can easily commute into urban areas. Hill and Moore prefer the terminology employed by the U.S. Bureau of Census,
which differentiates between *metropolitan* and *non-metropolitan* areas. For the U.S. Bureau of Census, a metropolitan county is one that includes a city of 50,000 or more, or is near a large city and has a highly urbanized population. The concept of non-metropolitan consequently defines rurality in terms of what it is not: “rural is what is left over after metropolitan areas are designated” (p. 346).

Similarly, in a recent report, Industry Canada (2001) acknowledges that no universal definition for rural exists, but defines a compromise definition of non-metropolitan as including those areas outside the commuting zone of metropolitan areas.

**Challenges of Rurality**

Rural communities face a number of challenges besides imprecise definition. Sennett and Cobb (1972) point out that rural residents, with their historical economic dependence on primary industry and manual labour, have long been associated with lower classes. Gillett-Karam (1995) summarizes the negative qualities of rural American communities with the words “low, slow and high – low population density, low total populations, low per-capita income, low levels of educational attainment, slow job growth, high poverty, high unemployment, and high rates of illiteracy” (p. 43). These descriptors are, of course, not limited to the United States; Human Resource Development Canada (2000) includes each of these descriptors when reporting on the highly rural southeast corner of British Columbia. In addition, Hill and Moore (2000) suggest
that globalization impacts rural economics more strongly and negatively than it does urban economies, especially in terms of employment opportunities.

A growing number of sources in the literature (e.g., Eller, R., Martinez, R., Pace, C., Pavel, M., Garza, H., & Barnett, L., 1998; HRDC, 2000; Tremblay, 2001) acknowledge that the educational situations of non-metropolitan communities are different. Brain drain – the out-migration of secondary school graduates to more urban centres in order to pursue further education or better employment options – is a problem prevalent in many small communities. Roth (1996) notes the urban bias of most educational research, implying that research with rural data would be likely to suggest different conclusions.

Patterns of Learning in Rural Communities

Those who remain in (or move to) rural communities follow a number of patterns of adult learning. The literature does not suggest that individual modes of learning are any different for rural learners than for others. Rural residents, like other adult learners, are likely to undertake a variety of learning projects (Tough, 1979), follow familiar patterns of self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975), and incidental learning (Kerka, 2000b). Rural adults also learn together in groups that develop formally or informally within the community.

First Nations villages constitute a special kind of small community. Auger (1997) describes a number of types of learning practised in many Cree communities, which may be entirely unfamiliar to those of European
backgrounds. For example, he relates the participation of some Cree community members in learning activities based on a deeply spiritual and wholistic educational philosophy, including a form of direct, non-verbal teaching-learning relationship with living beings and natural forces. In many communities, Elders are still the primary teachers of traditional information. Atleo and James (2000) note the re-emergence of oral tradition as an important educational tool in First Nations communities. On the one hand, the current focus on building capacity for self-government has sparked considerable interest among many British Columbia aboriginal leaders for more “modern” educational projects (e.g., see Baruah, 1998). Winter (1997), on the other hand, reports on the ambivalence towards postsecondary education in some First Nations communities. Her research reveals that although some members consider postsecondary education to be important for the development of the community, others consider it unnecessary, and still others feel that postsecondary education contributes to the detriment of the community.

Rural community residents participate in formal, traditionally organized educational activities as well. During the 1950s to the 1970s, most provincial governments developed a community college system, in part to meet the adult education needs of communities outside the urban cores (Selman & Dampier, 1991). Nevertheless, educational attainment for rural and non-metropolitan residents is significantly lower than that of their more urban counterparts (Industry Canada, 2001), reflecting a lower participation rate in formal
educational activities. A variety of reasons is suggested in the literature to explain this statistic. D. L. Brown (1987) suggests a number of conditions, including cultural and lifestyle influences that do not necessarily stress the importance of education, less disposable income to support higher education activities, and a less stable economic climate. Eller, Martinez, Pace, Pavel, Garza, and Barnett (1998) report that citizens of economically distressed rural communities often consider the college to be a “forbidding institution” (p. 5) and postsecondary education to be “an alien idea” (ibid.). Roth (1996) suggests that the practice of utilizing programmes designed for a general learner audience may be at fault, because data from large quantitative studies often fail to take into account the unique community-based needs of rural schools.

Recent literature reflects a trend towards recognizing the necessity of tailoring programmes to the needs of rural communities. Stein (1998) includes community in his list of elements of situated learning, noting that the community provides the setting for the learning as well as the group with which the learner must negotiate meaning. When redefining the meaning of access for rural community colleges, Eller et al. (1998) stress that “local cultural content cannot be overlooked” (p. 2) and note that the most effective rural college initiatives include a focus on community-based approaches. Thorn (1995) notes the necessity for rural college staff to “accept some responsibility for understanding the local community, making links with other community organizations and developing a curriculum related to the needs and aspirations of that community”
Programming that is not only related to community needs and aspirations but is designed specifically to address community issues is often identified as *community development*.

**Community Development for Rural Communities**

Community development differs from other forms of community-based education in that it is initiated by the community itself. Many – if not most – community development projects in rural communities are related to economic development. The Ontario Rural Community Development Research and Services Committee (1999), for example, recognizes the integration of economic, social and environmental aspects in rural community development, but nevertheless identifies economic development as being pivotal: “Successful community development is rooted in local action – community leaders working with their communities, businesses and organizations to assist them in identifying and taking advantage of their economic development opportunities” (Section 3, para. 2). In contrast, some literature sources describe community development projects that are not focussed on economic growth or sustainability: for example, community cultural development includes activities such as the production of community art projects to foster community well-being while counteracting the dehumanizing effects of globalization (Power, 1997).

A number of researchers have identified specific roles for adult education within community development. Carter (1999) identifies three main categories of
development projects for poor rural communities: capacity building, policy
development or refinement, and education and interdisciplinary approaches.
Holub (1996) suggests that although significant technological, economic and
societal changes affect nearly all humans, these changes have had an even
greater impact on rural agrarian communities. He details a process of
community-based programming, by which community colleges can become more
familiar with and responsive to local problems, such as illiteracy. Faris and
Peterson (2000) refer to a learning community approach to foster “the acquisition
of information, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that together build a
community’s capacity to successfully respond to, and direct, economic and social
change” (p. 7).

Community development in non-metropolitan areas is often identified as
extension education. This broad and influential educational activity is discussed
in the following section.

Extension Education

Extension education has enjoyed a prominent position in the history of
adult education in Canada: Selman and Dampier (1991) make no fewer than 26
references to extension education in The Foundations of Adult Education in
Canada. However, despite such frequent use in adult education literature, this
term (like rural) is not so easy to define. In general, extension education is used
to refer to two main types of educational delivery: agricultural programming and
university continuing education. Although the same term is used to describe two very different educational foci, both aspects of extension have, historically, been similarly tailored to meet the needs of a rural learner audience.

Extension education in Canada has its own unique flavour and boundaries; nevertheless, early, formal extension activities were clearly derived from similar practices in either Great Britain or the United States. Selman and Dampier (1991) refer to the origins of university extension activity at Cambridge University in 1873 and the introduction of a similar system into Canada in the 1890s. The Morrill Act of 1862, which established the system of land grant universities and extension throughout the United States, had a profound influence on the introduction of agricultural extension in Canada as well.

At what point did the two meanings of extension education diverge? It seems likely that the dual focus was initiated by the University of Wisconsin in 1907. Selman and Dampier (1991) relate the history:

In 1907, the University of Wisconsin began the development of a new type of university work, one which took as its starting point, not the type of teaching and subject matter which had been traditional university fare, but rather the educational needs of the people to be served. Instead of relying on the traditional lecture method and restricting itself to the usual academic content, the university devised other ways of serving the educational needs of adult citizens – correspondence instruction, audiovisual devices of various kinds, short courses and workshops, information pamphlets, travelling “field men” who were expert in the practical application of their fields of knowledge and scientific and consulting support services. (p. 41)

In an era when almost 30 percent of all workers were involved in the
agricultural sector (Applebee, 2000), no doubt educational resources related to farming activities were the primary learning needs of rural people. However, a number of authors and institutions (Applebee, 2000; Blackburn & Flaherty, 1994; Coady, 1957; University of Guelph, n.d.) have identified a larger historical focus for extension education. Blackburn and Flaherty, for example, include the following sub-topics for a chapter entitled “Historical Roots”: Agricultural Representatives, The 4-H Club, The Antigonish Movement, The Farm Radio Forum, Women’s Institutes, and Frontier College (pp. 3-4). The Antigonish Movement has especially broadened the meaning of what constitutes extension education in the Canadian context. During the early, most active decades of the Antigonish Movement, the Extension Department of St. Francis Xavier University organized maritime fishers, helped to develop commercial processing and marketing cooperatives, promoted consumer cooperatives, organized credit unions, encouraged cooperative housing projects, and initiated a number of community-based educational programmes (MacDonald, 1998).

The homepage of the University of Guelph’s School of Rural Extension Studies illustrates a similar, diverse focus for extension work. This institution was established in 1959 through the direct support of the Ontario Department of Agriculture, but the school currently does not even mention agriculture in its mission statement: “To enhance the quality of life of rural people and communities, acknowledge and respect a diversity of needs and perspectives, through the provision of educational opportunities, interdisciplinary research, and
community outreach” (Section 2).

In general, the literature portrays extension education as a broad and flexible area of practice, relating more to audience (primarily rural) and context (community-based) than to content (agriculture- or university curriculum-based). Blackburn (1989) states: “Extension education and community development are ‘the fraternal twins of social change’” (p. vii); this strong, clear philosophical stance is perhaps the most unifying identity of extension work.

During the most recent decade, many authors have pointed out that this educational area is undergoing a period of rapid and uncertain transition. For example, Applebee (2000) refers explicitly to “mission drift” (p. 415) in the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) of the United States. He mentions – repeatedly – that the original agricultural focus is no longer sufficient for either the CES organization or for the people it serves. Lauzon (1997) asserts: “Extension education must broaden its mission, it must move beyond simple technical-rationality and recognize that solutions to our problems can only be found in creating a new vision that accepts as its starting point moral discourse” (Section 6). But perhaps the strongest statement is that made by King and Boehlje (2000), in the title for their commentary article in the October, 2000 issue of the Journal of Extension: “Extension: On the Brink of Extinction or Distinction?”

Although extension education seems to be moving inexorably towards some critical change, most writers foresee positive outcomes for the
transformation. Applebee (2000) suggests that extension could move beyond being merely an educational resource and instead “reengineer itself as a reflective learning system” (p. 409). He sees the potential for the CES to leverage its good reputation and extensive distribution network in order to “transform the organization as a key contributor to the development of society” (p. 421). DeYoung, Harris, and Larsen (1995) conducted a pilot project, linking rural Oregon leaders with a computer database network. They envision a growing relationship between extension education and new communications technology and conclude, “The creation of virtual communities through the use of Internet technology holds much promise for Cooperative Extension workers” (Conclusions section, para. 3). Even King and Boehlje (2000), who began their commentary with “The sky is falling,” suggest that an electronic extension service may enable the CES to continue to fulfill its original mandate in the information age.

For more than a hundred years, extension education has provided a model for extending education into rural communities. This delivery model has changed with the times, and has recently adapted to include new communications technologies among its delivery strategies. Distance education, reviewed in the next section, offers yet another approach to educational delivery in rural communities.

**Distance Education**
Over the past several decades, educational institutions have adapted many new communication technologies for distance delivery of courses and entire programmes. This increased activity in distance education is reflected in the rich and diverse body of literature relating to this field. In this section I review distance education first in terms of its history, theoretical background and scope. Next, I provide an overview of how technology is used in distance education and the ethical issues arising from this application. Finally, I review how distance education has been adapted for delivery to rural learners.

**History and Scope of Distance Education**

The field of distance education has emerged from a contested beginning. Although several researchers report that courses were offered by correspondence sometime in the early 1700s (Jeffries, n.d.; University of Houston, 2001), others pinpoint the beginning with the delivery of the first course in Pitman Shorthand, offered through the British Penny Post, in 1837 (Public Broadcasting Service’s Adult Learning Service, 2001). Campbell Gibson (2000) suggests that distance education began at Oxford and Cambridge Universities in 1857, when the printing press enabled these institutions to “extend their universities to anyone who desired to learn” (p. 423). Formal distance education initiatives did not begin in Canada until 1889, when Queen’s University began offering university courses by correspondence (Rogers, 1993).

Most researchers who review the history of distance education include an
annotated timeline with a focus on technology (e.g., Adult Learning Service of the Public Broadcasting Service, 2001). However, others consider a deeper philosophical concept of distance and a broader interpretation of technology. Klass (2000), for example, identifies Plato as a distance education pioneer because of his use of the new technology of writing. According to Klass, some of Plato’s peers were less supportive of this new technology: they were concerned that writing would be used not to improve memory and wisdom but as merely a tool for reminding and a means to convey opinions rather than true wisdom.

The concept of being able to learn in an unconventional way, mediated by some sort of technology, is certainly not new. In the remainder of this section I examine distance education’s variable definition, prominent theories, and focus on the learner.

**Definitions of distance education.** Terms to describe distance delivery, such as correspondence study or educational television, often reflect the type of technology utilized. The more generic term *distance education* was not in use until 1965 (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Over the past 36 years, the term has been defined in a number of ways. Ljosa (1993) notes how distance education is often defined as a shadow or converse of more familiar forms of delivery:

> It is similar to the situation when the inventors of the automobile tried to imagine the car as a sort of horseless carriage with something in front of it which was not a horse. Distance education is also very often compared to what it is similar to, but still is not like. (p. 37)

Campbell Gibson (2000) defines distance education in terms of delivery
strategies, as “education or training offered by an agency or organization with an educational mission to serve learners at remote locations via print, audio, video, computer, or a combination of these technologies” (p. 423). Moore and Kearsley’s (1996) highly functional definition is frequently quoted by others:

Distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements. (p. 2)

Although distance education remains the most common term in this field, other terminologies reflect shifts in emphasis or philosophy. *Open learning* describes a type of education which may not involve geographical distance but instead emphasizes a programme structure less likely to restrict access based on prerequisites or scheduled timelines (Selman & Dampier, 1991). *Distributed learning* is sometimes used interchangeably with distance education (or distance learning). However, when explicitly defined, the term tends to emphasize the addition of technology and asynchronous teaching strategies to a more conventional classroom situation. For example, Miller’s (1997) definition is utilized by the University of British Columbia:

A distributed learning environment is a learner-centred approach to education, which integrates a number of technologies to enable opportunities for activities and interaction in both asynchronous and real-time modes. The model is based on blending a choice of appropriate technologies with aspects of campus-based delivery, open learning systems and distance education. The approach gives instructors the
flexibility to customize learning environments to meet the needs of diverse student populations, while providing both high quality and cost-effective learning. (n.p.)

Although it lacks precise definition, the term **distance education** offers a useful description for a form of educational delivery that can be further defined with a number of more specific qualifiers. Distance education theory, however, lacks such development.

**Theories of distance education.** Although interest in distance education has grown considerably in recent decades, little formal theorizing has been done to explain the phenomenon. Some writers attempt to describe distance education in terms of other, more well-established theories. Moore and Kearsley (1996) relate how early theorizing about distance education was influenced by andragogy and self-directed learning. Rossman (2000) similarly examines the relationship between andragogy and distance education and describes how principles of andragogy can be applied to distance learning programmes in order to improve climate-setting and learner involvement. In contrast, Phillips and Peters (1999) discuss distance education primarily in terms of a business transaction, with the distance learning audience as a sort of niche market.

Perhaps the best-developed theory of distance education is the theory of transactional distance, developed by Michael Moore (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Moore focusses not on the geographical distance separating teacher and learner, but the “pedagogical distance” between them: the “distance of
understandings and perceptions . . . that have to be overcome by teachers, learners, and educational organizations if effective, deliberate, planned learning is to occur” (p. 200). He defines the educational activity as a transaction and postulates that transactional distance is a result of the interplay between structure and dialogue within the course or programme. Moore concludes that although learners with a high level of autonomy can succeed in programmes with significant transactional distance, the distance must be decreased – by reducing the amount of structure or increasing the dialogue – for others to experience success. Chen and Willits (1998), while noting the general utility of the theory of transactional distance, suggest that the changing field of distance education requires updated theories in order to provide better guidelines for practice.

**The distance learner.** It is difficult to locate estimates of the number of learners currently studying by distance in Canada, although Lauzon (2000) claims that distance education is growing “exponentially” (p. 61). A number of sources provide a detailed profile of the distance learner. Thompson (1998) describes the average distance learner in North America as between the ages of 25 and 45, married, and employed. She also reports that learners with disabilities and learners from minority and other under-represented groups are better-represented in distance programmes than they are in more conventional educational deliveries. Although the majority of North American distance learners are female, the gender ratio varies considerably among cultures. Moore and Kearsley (1996) include information about the personality traits of distance
learners; they note that virtually all such learners enroll voluntarily, bring a high level of anxiety to the learning situation, are highly motivated, and are task oriented.

In spite of the strong personal qualities distance learners bring to their education, a number of factors interfere with their success (here success is defined as learners’ ability to complete their studies). Researchers have noted the high attrition rate among distance learners and have suggested hypotheses to explain the success or non-success of these learners (Saba, 2000; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Zeeb, 2000). Moore and Kearsley observe that the most successful distance learners had the intention of completing the course in three months, submitted the first lesson within 40 days, had higher entrance examination scores and high GPAs, had completed other correspondence courses, had a supportive family, had high goals for completing the program, lived closer to the instructor, and had good college-level preparation. The single most important variable was the students’ intention to complete. (pp. 160-161)

Kember (cited in Eastmond, 1998) reports that social and academic integration are critical aspects of distance learners’ success. Social integration includes obtaining support for the educational endeavour; academic integration is identified as largely the responsibility of the academic institution (by providing strong course design and teaching, as well as essential support services). The National Institute for Literacy (2000) also recognizes that the institution has a major responsibility for supporting distance learning success. It reports that distance learning can be as effective as classroom instruction if the methods
used are appropriate to course objectives, interaction among students is promoted, and a consistent dialogue is established between teacher and learner. Lauzon (2000) looks beyond both the individual and the institution and suggests that culture plays a significant role in the success of distance learners; the learners most likely to succeed are those whose values are most closely aligned with the academic community they seek to join.

Distance education has grown considerably in recent decades, with more distance courses, more institutional interest in distance programming, and more distance learners. Recent literature reflects the almost ubiquitous adoption of new communications technologies in distance education planning – a development so important that it is discussed further in the next subsection.

**Technology in Distance Education**

Distance education has long been associated with educational or communications technologies. Whereas the earlier technologies involved printed words and postal delivery, today distance education consists largely of “electronically mediated instruction” (National Institute for Literacy, 2000). In this subsection I look at two issues of technology: (a) its ability to increase access or barriers to participation, and (b) other issues in its implementation.

**Access or barrier?** In the past half-century, the concept of distance education has become increasingly shaped by new communications technologies. Svensson (1998) comments on three generations of distance
education: correspondence, teleconferencing, and computers and electronic media. But considerable research documents that successful learning outcomes are not dependent upon the choice of medium used for educational delivery (e.g., Russell, 2001). Dede (2000) notes that the utilization of a variety of distance learning media offers a learning experience superior to the utilization of any one of them:

for each medium utilized – some students are empowered, others disenfranchised and the net impact averages out. In contrast, well-designed courses using several instructional media with differing characteristics (e.g., synchronous vs. asynchronous, high-bandwidth vs. low bandwidth, contextualized vs. decontextualized) enable all students to utilize their most effective ways of individual learning. Mixed-media courses have the potential for better learning outcomes for every student than comparable courses taught via any single medium – including solely face-to-face instruction. (Section 2, para. 2)

This focus on the technology of delivery for distance education is pervasive in the literature of distance education, especially in the last decade or so. However, a number of researchers have looked beyond the excitement of these new communications technologies and have begun to examine the complex ethical issues that accompany such changes in educational delivery. In many cases, technology can increase access to learning; but for some people, technology acts as a barrier instead.

Most researchers agree that new technologies in distance education increase access to educational opportunities. Haughey (1990) suggests that this increased access is in some ways automatic: as computers and other technology
become more familiar both at home and at work, they quite naturally become effective tools for distance education as well. Others report on not only the passive adoption of technology for distance education purposes, but on the active development of new educational applications. Walker (2000), for example, describes the use of solar-powered FM radio microstations for community-based educational delivery in rural Uganda. Many researchers comment on the power of new technology to open up learning to previously marginalized audiences. The Distributed Learning Task Force (1997) notes how access to education has traditionally been denied to “those who because of family responsibilities, employment needs, geographic location or physical ability factors” (Executive Summary section, para. 2) have not been able to utilize traditional educational delivery systems. The Task Force describes in detail a number of processes by which new technologies could be applied to not just increase access to new audiences but also to facilitate new ways of teaching and learning. Although most research describes the application of technology to postsecondary adult learners, some writers recognize the potential for less advanced learning levels as well. The National Institute for Literacy (2000), for example, notes the interest in distance learning technologies by literacy leaders.

Technology is not viewed by all as an unqualified educational benefit: some writers consider technology to be a barrier to access. With the increased use of communications technology in so many aspects of people’s lives comes a resultant cultural expectation of digital information literacy (Kerka, 2000a). Those
who, for one reason or another, have been unable to access this technology are at risk of being left behind. A number of researchers refer to a growing “digital divide” between technological haves and have-nots (Kerka, 2000a; The Digital Divide Network, [n.d.]; Jurich, 2000). Kerka considers the digital divide to be largely a result of economic factors: “The number of resources available only electronically and for a fee is increasing. . . . of what use is information literacy if individuals cannot afford access?” (p. 34).

Care and Udod (2000) argue that gender influences the degree of barrier experienced in distance education. They note that “[computer mediated communication] does not promote equity of access, as much as replace existing inequities with another, such as student variations in computer literacy” (p. 8) and suggest that “as female students gain computer skills, the technology-gender gap that currently exists between men and women will begin to narrow” (p. 9). Lauzon (2000) suggests instead a cultural divide, warning that technological practices in distance education may create a barrier for “learners whose values are in conflict with those of the dominant educational discourse” (p. 65). Lauzon (2000) expresses even stronger views about the ability of technology to facilitate learning in distance education:

There are, however, those who insist that technology allows for active distance learning. This idea is merely an illusion. While learners may be actively engaged, they are often actively engaged with the technology, rather than with the content in critically meaningful ways. (p. 63)
Most researchers, however, disagree. Dewar (1999), who writes about on-line learning both from the perspective of a distance learner and an on-line instructor, recalls her initial reservations:

I didn’t feel that such a high tech approach could facilitate these dimensions of learning. As in face to face classes, however, it is the design of the course, the learners themselves, and the approach that the facilitator takes that make the difference. (Section 4, para. 5)

Dewar continues to describe how electronic communication enables learners to focus less on the common distractions of face to face discussion and more on the spiritual side of those with whom they communicate. Similarly, Zeeb (2000) considers computer-mediated communication methods to be inherently well-suited to support mentoring relationships for distance learners. Svensson (1998) describes the delivery of a distance math course in which a number of communication technologies (interactive videoconferencing, discussion board and an email delivery system) were successfully employed. Chen and Willets (1998) note the importance of discussion in distance courses in reducing transactional distance and decreasing the attrition rate among distance learners. Care and Udod (2000), although promoting caution about the technology-gender gap, note that the collaborative possibilities of shared on-line projects and mediated chat discussions could contribute to a more appropriate distance learning experience for women.

*Other issues in the use of technology.* Technology raises other ethical issues besides questions about access. Campbell Gibson (2000), for example,
comments on the emancipatory potential of distance learning, but Lauzon (2000) warns about the power of distance education to threaten cultural diversity. Kirby (1993) notes the growing professionalization of the field and the evolving meaning of distance, as technology enables easier and more interactive relationships between teachers and learners. Pacey and Penney (1995) suggest that debate about the role of technology in distance education is already meaningless because the same technology is so much a part of most Canadians’ everyday lives anyway.

Researchers disagree on the ability of technology to support a sense of community in distance educational contexts. Computerized discussion boards and other communications technologies are frequently mentioned in the literature as a way to develop a sense of community among on-line learners. George (2002) notes that the on-line community may also be referred to as an e-community or virtual community and that it “cannot be seen, but does exist as social relationships in electronic form that occur when members of the e-community communicate through a common place on the internet” (p. 14). A number of writers emphasize the importance of on-line communities for distance learner satisfaction, performance, and persistence (for example, see Rovai, 2002, and Palloff & Pratt, 1999), but caution that these communities must be initially structured and facilitated by the educator. R. E. Brown (2001) focuses her inquiry on how such virtual communities develop among a group of on-line learners. She proposes that virtual learning communities are built in a three-step
process: in the first step, learners make friends with like-minded participants; next, learners experience a more generalized sense of satisfaction and kinship as a result of lengthy discussion; finally, a sense of camaraderie is established in the on-line learning environment. It is interesting to note that even in this thoughtful, well-supported on-line environment, 9 of Brown’s 21 participants did not conclusively agree that a sense of community had been established.

The use of technology in distance education raises complex administrative issues as well. Kelly (2001) wonders about the relevance of charging out-of-state tuition fees, when so many American postsecondary institutions can broadcast educational programming and support learners at almost any distance from the campus, with virtually no increase in cost. Reinking (2001) explores a number of ethical issues that arise as we shift from a book-based to a post-typographic literacy. He explains how the concept of plagiarism must change as technology provides us with faster and more extensive access to the ideas of others. He also queries the concept of copyright; of restricting access to such easily available information to only those able to pay: “When is it ethically justifiable to deny people access to and dissemination of potentially useful information?” (n.p.)

Several other writers have raised questions about the ethical use of technology. Campbell Gibson (2000) feels it is essential to question the promise of access in any distance education programme: access to whom, to what, and with what results? She notes that without corresponding learner support,
Distance education offerings do not provide true access for many adult learners. Lauzon (2000) is even more blunt: “It is important, therefore, for distance educators to question what the implications are for a field of inquiry that defines its evolution strictly in terms of technological development” (p. 62).

The development, exploration and application of technology in distance education are well represented and highly current in the literature. Some researchers, however, have begun to question the ethical aspects of distance education and the promise of universal access for marginalized populations – including rural residents.

Distance Education for Rural Learners

The body of literature for distance education reveals that many – if not most – distance education programmes are not designed specifically to meet the needs of rural learners. In *Learning without Limits: Model Distance Education Programs in Community Colleges* (Lever-Duffy, Lemke, & Johnson, 1996), for example, most of the distance programmes featured are designed by and for a largely urban audience. Many of the definitions or statements of purpose for distance education programmes do not mention meeting the needs of rural learners as a principle or even noteworthy inclusion. The definition suggested by The National Institute for Literacy (2000), for example, refers to geographic isolation in only a general way: “Distance learning [is] instruction mediated by print or some form of technology that takes place when the teacher and learner
are separated by space and/or time” (Introductory section, para. 2). Khan (2000) provides an elegant framework for e-learning with eight dimensions and numerous subdimensions: the considerations of social, cultural, and geographical diversity are buried within one of the subdimensions.

Nevertheless, researchers writing from within the non-metropolitan experience acknowledge that the needs of rural educational institutions and rural learners are often different. Randall and Clews (2001) highlight the issue with a question: “How do people in fields such as education . . . function effectively in rural communities, when the preparation they receive to do so often implies an urban model of the world?” (p. 1). In his thesis, D. L. Brown (1987) notes that “the more urbanized an area is, the greater the propensity of the adult population to participate in some form of higher education” (p. 241). Later, he concludes that “the main social group to benefit from distance education in British Columbia has consisted of economically secure, upwardly mobile anglophones living in heavily urbanized or metropolitan areas within easy commuting distance of post-secondary facilities” (p. 529). Kershaw (1996) discusses the economic factors that affect a college’s ability to meet the educational needs of remote communities. He considers the demand for a variety of courses from a small number of students and the difficulty in locating qualified faculty as the main impediments to cost-effective delivery.

Others have noted that distance education institutions often operate in ways which conflict with rural cultures. Matheos, Rempel, Kern, deBruin, and
Nurse (2000) describe two mitigating circumstances that affect rural women who undertake university courses by distance:

One is the distinctiveness of the rural culture – specifically, the unique familial, cultural, geographic and social characteristics and context of rural areas. The other . . . is found in the policies and practices of universities and the ways in which they deliver education at a distance to adult learners. (Introductory section, para. 2)

Lauzon (2000) refers to the technocratic and instrumental nature of distance education and concludes:

When distance learners from culturally diverse backgrounds enter the community of practice known as distance education, they may experience oppression by having to adhere to a story that is not their story, to subscribe to a knowledge that is not their knowledge, to adopt values that are not their values, while their stories, knowledge or values are viewed as irrelevant, are denigrated, or, worse yet, are considered “wrong.” (p. 65)

Haughey (1990), writing about the role of distance education in the development of isolated northern communities, stresses the importance of the historical and political context of distance learners. She advises distance educators to consider the political and social effects of their work and the disruption to local “ways of knowing” that outside educational systems introduce.

**Distance learners in rural and remote communities.** Little information exists to document the experience of distance learners in rural and remote communities. Several sources hint at the thirst for educational opportunities that non-metropolitan audiences feel. MacBrayne (1995) explores the question: For what reasons do rural residents enroll in distance programmes? Her research
reveals that rural residents enroll with both job-related and self-improvement goals in mind. However, the main factor in the enrolment decision is the convenient location of the educational offering itself: in other words, rural learners may participate in a course not because they are especially interested in the subject area, but because they want to study something. Matheos et al. (2000) also note: “Geography predisposes any educational programme that an adult needs or wants as well as when and where learning takes place” (Section 3, para. 3). They document some general observations about the experience of rural women learners, listing as major themes: the terrifying pursuit of an academic path, the significant impact of culture, the lack of recognition for hard work in intellectual pursuits, the profound sense of isolation, and the sense of alienation from the institution. These learners often comment on their increasing confidence and their growing empowerment as they continue their educational journeys. Fiddler (1990) relates direct experience in a poignant communication from one adult learner, struggling to study in a remote Ontario community, to her teacher:

We have only one phone, and it is connected directly to the wall, so that we can not have a convenor to speak with you over the air. We have no airstrip, and freeze-up is coming, and we will not be able to get materials in and out to you for a month. I am the only one taking this course and my friend who supports me flew out yesterday with her sick baby. We have no hydro, and so we are using kerosene lamps; this makes reading difficult. And the calculators that you sent us are solar operated, and I am standing here with a flashlight over it to make it work. (p. 117)
Nevertheless, this learner was considering quitting her job in order to catch up on her assignments and complete the course.

Some distance programmes do explicitly address the special needs of rural learners. In the last example cited above, the learner was assisted to remain in the course (and was sent a new calculator!). Her distance learning provider, the Wahsa programme (Fiddler, 1990) has incorporated a number of adaptations to meet the unique needs of Northwestern Ontario (primarily First Nations) communities: courses available by radio or correspondence, self-paced or structured, and in language formats appropriate to the communities.

Krantz, Page, and Thomson (2000) describe a post-secondary Early Childhood Education programme that has been tailored to meet the needs of Northern BC learners. The programme includes flexible adaptations of course materials, communications technology for student-to-student interaction, and an innovative practicum that enables learners to experience different workplace settings while minimizing the need for extensive travel. Svensson (1998) conducted his research for a distance B.Sc. programme, delivered to small communities in the academic outback of Sweden. A unique blend of correspondence, on-line communication and videoconferencing was utilized to deliver a first-year math course.

**The potential for distance education.** Although descriptions of successful distance programmes for rural learners are hard to find, a number of researchers are optimistic about the promise of distance education for the future.
Robinson (1992) is very direct about the potential of distance education for northern communities: “Distance education serves small communities, many of which are infused with traditional wisdom and struggling to retain or recapture self-reliance in an economic environment characterized by change and unpredictability” (p. 21). Haughey (1990) comments on the value of retaining valuable employees in rural workplaces: “In a vast land area with scattered settlements, the emphasis should be on the development of educational opportunities which support and sustain employees in their local communities” (p. 31). Holub (1996) emphasizes the twofold, practical nature of distance education for rural communities: rural learners are able to take advantage of critical training and educational opportunities; and they are able to develop proficiency with communications technology, which has become increasingly essential for participation in new economies. Carter (1999) sees distance education as a way to address the power imbalance between rural poor and urban wealthier communities: “new technologies and increasing access to distance learning, telecommuting, and e-commerce show promise for changing power dynamics and providing new opportunities in distressed rural communities” (Section 2).

Despite the limitations of distance delivery and ethical issues surrounding the use of technology, many researchers recognize the potential for distance education to contribute to rural learners and their communities.

Summary of the Literature
The concept of community is generally not well defined in adult education literature. The term is used in a wide variety of practices and for diverse purposes, but Dunbar (1996) clearly connects community and pivotal communication processes with a relatively generic definition: “individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind of relationship that goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us” (Chap. 8, para. 14).

In general, adult education researchers accept the community as the site for much adult learning, although the interaction between the learner and the community is often considered only from one direction: the ability of the learner (or a group of learners) to effect change in the community. The concept of a community of practice (as articulated by Wenger, 1998), however, provides a model for viewing education as not only situated within the community but also reciprocally affected by it. According to Heaney (1995), these communities of practice may provide not only a framework for the education of participants, but also a means of controlling access to such education. Giroux (1991) uses the term border pedagogy to describe the process of learning to navigate the contested border areas where communities and cultures intersect.

The literature highlights a number of outstanding adult education projects that took place in rural Canadian communities during the earlier part of the last century. However, most recent sources describe research based on urban problems and conducted with urban audiences. In general, these urban-based researchers do not identify their urban bias and so construct conclusions or
recommendations that may not be as widely applicable as they imply. Although
the concept of rurality is changing, researchers writing from a non-metropolitan
perspective provide ample evidence that these communities are qualitatively
different from the urban environment. The focus of literature in the field of
extension education, which has traditionally been written for an agricultural
audience, has been shifting in Canada to reflect the wider learning needs of rural
communities. With its history of promoting technological change in rural
communities, extension may continue to play a significant part in rural
sustainability and evolution.

The body of literature related to distance education (historically
considered synonymous with the delivery of correspondence courses) has
recently undergone tremendous growth and change. Current distance education
literature is heavily focussed on the application of new communications
technologies; however, some writers have begun to question the ethical aspects
of such uncritical application and the promise of universal access. Many distance
education researchers – like many adult educators in general – write from an
urban perspective, without consideration of how their research may be applied in
non-metropolitan contexts. Researchers writing from a rural perspective,
however, are generally optimistic about the ability of distance education to meet
the needs of non-metropolitan communities, if the educational offering is tailored
to community dimensions.

Most distance education literature is practice-oriented rather than theory-
oriented. The development of theory within the field of distance education has not kept pace with the development or application of new practices; consequently, little theory exists to explain the phenomenon of distance learning. This deficit is especially apparent in the application of distance education in community based contexts. In community learning literature, distance education is noted tangentially (if at all), as an outside learning practice. Some writers have noted the potential of distance education to effect change for rural learners and non-metropolitan communities, but their research is either strongly practice-based (for example, see Robinson, 1992) or highly philosophical (for example, see Lauzon, 2000). No theory exists to describe the experience of distance education for rural learners. In the next chapter, I describe my effort to address this lack.
CHAPTER 3

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS AND FINDINGS

The literature review provided me with a perspective on community and a background in current distance education practice on which to base my study.

The literature I reviewed also reinforced my observation that most approaches in distance education delivery do not acknowledge the unique community situations in which rural learners are immersed. In this chapter I describe how I investigated the relationship between rural learners’ primary communities and their distance learning experience. The chapter is organized into five main sections: In the first section, I detail how I planned, implemented and analyzed a series of interviews with rural distance learners; and in the next four sections, I present the findings from the interviews organized by the four themes that emerged.

Planning and Implementation

I began this project in January 2002. I spent the first month selecting and refining a research approach, then developing a series of interview questions. Over the next 3 months, I located participants and arranged, completed and transcribed 11 interviews. During the spring and summer of 2002, I analyzed the data and summarized the main themes. The following subsections describe this activity in more detail.

Planning the Interviews
In planning the interviews, I first prepared a draft list of questions, which I revised based on feedback from colleagues and my faculty advisor. I then piloted the interview with a friend and made some additional, minor changes to my interview plan. In accordance with grounded theory process (Dick, 2000), I reviewed my interview questions after the first couple of interviews and made several minor changes. I changed the sequence of the questions to better reflect the natural flow of the discussion, and also added sub-questions in order to elicit more focused responses to questions that participants had found confusing or vague. This revised question list is included as Appendix A.

When searching for potential participants, I had originally planned to solicit interviewees from a number of very small communities throughout the East Kootenay region. However, the request for participants, which I had posted in several small general stores, went largely unnoticed. Only two adults responded to these posters, and neither of the respondents agreed to an interview. I initially found this apparent lack of interest surprising and frustrating. Later, it made sense in light of the overall results of my research – an observation I reflect upon in a later section. To connect with potential interviewees, I found it necessary to rely on word-of-mouth requests through colleagues, friends, and friends-of-friends.

When selecting participants to for my study, I sought as wide a range as possible of ages, educational backgrounds, and learning experiences. Among the 11 people who completed an interview, considerable diversity was
represented: participants ranged in age from late 20s to early 60s; one participant was Métis and one suffered from a disability. Five communities and both genders were represented (four men and seven women). Educational backgrounds included one participant without high school completion, one tradesperson, several learners at the bachelor’s level, and several master’s degree candidates. The distance programmes under discussion during the interviews included (among others) a trades programme, several adult basic education courses, a health care bachelor’s degree, an adult education certificate programme, and a master’s programme in a business administration specialty. No participants were involved in any way with the St. Francis Xavier Master of Adult Education programme, although my interpretation of this research was filtered through my personal experience as a distance student in that programme.

Implementing the Interviews
Before beginning the interviews, I verified with each participant that he or she understood the purpose of my research and my hopes for improving distance delivery strategies at the college as a result of this research. I explained that all contributions would be treated confidentially and I detailed what confidentiality meant in the context of this study. Each one then read and signed an informed consent letter, which detailed the public nature of a thesis, my methods for collecting and transcribing their input, and the measures I was taking to ensure accuracy and confidentiality of the data.

Although two interviews were conducted in participants’ homes and one was conducted by email, most of the interviews took place in my workplace office. My office is conveniently located in the community and situated in a quiet, private part of my workplace, so this location was generally agreed to be the best place to meet. Most interviews were scheduled over lunch or the afternoon coffee break, and took between an hour to an hour and a half to complete.

I began each interview with a series of open-ended questions about the individual’s sense of community and community issues, support for education within that community, and past learning experiences. As the interview progressed, I used a semi-structured approach to generate discussion around issues more specific to the participant’s distance learning project. I taped each interview (with participant permission) and subsequently transcribed the audiotape into a word-processed document. When each transcription was complete, I sent the document by email to the participant for review. Several
participants identified transcription errors or items that she or he preferred to have deleted. In order to protect the anonymity of each participant, I then corrected the transcript (as necessary), and removed any reference to people’s names, workplaces, or distance education institutions.

The Flow of a Typical Interview

A typical interview began with the exchange of pleasantries and perhaps a sharing of information about mutual acquaintances. I wanted my interviewees to feel relaxed and open; in this community, the identification of a mutual friend is often used to establish credibility. During this initial phase (which generally lasted from 5 to 10 minutes), I once again emphasized the confidential nature of the interview and confirmed that any interview information would not be directly identified with the interviewee.

I then described what I had been learning about the concept of community, including a brief overview of Dunbar’s (1996) work. The purpose of this introduction was to establish a relaxed sharing of information (and not a clinical, one-sided interview atmosphere), and to offer some framework to the discussion about community. This phase of the interview lasted about 5 minutes.

After establishing a tone and an initial framework for the discussion, I presented, one by one, the first few questions to elicit information about the participant’s view of his or her community. The participant was usually enthusiastic to describe his or her community context and talked, with little
prompting from me, for at least 15 minutes. At this point, I began to move the
discussion to the topic of distance education experience.

Working from my prepared interview questions, I asked the participant to
describe aspects of her or his distance education experience. In general, I
couraged the participant to move from topic to topic as he or she pleased,
posing direct queries only when my prepared questions had not been covered in
the course of the discussion. The distance education phase of the discussion
took from half- to three-quarters of an hour to complete. The largest proportion
(approximately 75 to 80%) of the conversation was provided by the participant.

As the interview drew to a close, I looked over my interview question list
with the participant. We reviewed any notes I had made and the participant often
added additional information to address any gaps. I then reiterated the process
by which the interview would be transcribed and the data returned to the
participant for review. This wrap-up phase lasted from 10 to 20 minutes.

Data Analysis

I followed a grounded theory approach to analyze the results of this study.
Grounded theory includes the two key processes of theoretical sampling and
constant comparative analysis (Merriam & Simpson, 2000; and Dick, 2000).
Theoretical sampling is the guiding process by which data collection is
accomplished. This process includes the selection of an initial sample based on
its obvious relevance to the research problem; then, after analyzing the results of
this sample, selecting additional samples with the potential to challenge and support these preliminary results. In this way, theoretical sampling leads to a purposeful increase in the diversity of the research sample. Constant comparative analysis is the key process by which the resultant data are analyzed. At first, one interview is compared with another and tentative commonalities (properties) are identified. As properties are confirmed by continuing data collection, theory begins to emerge; subsequent interviews are compared with the emergent theory. This comparison is documented as the research progresses with note-taking, coding, memoing, and sorting (see Merriam & Simpson, 2000). My actual process of doing this is described in the rest of this section.

**Note-taking.** I was not able to jot down detailed notes during the interview, as it became too difficult to focus clearly on what the interviewee was saying while I was attempting to write. However, immediately after each interview I wrote brief notes to describe general features of the interviewing situation that would not be apparent from the tape. For example, I noted whether the interviewee seemed relaxed or whether it was easy to establish a rapport. I added to these notes while doing the transcription, when it was easier to focus on the interviewee’s tone of voice and expressions of interest or frustration with the topic under discussion.

**Constant comparison.** After transcribing the first interview, I struggled to understand what was going on in the research situation; to determine what kind
of relationship existed between the participant’s primary community and the distance learning experience. Eventually, I was able to suggest about half a dozen very tentative themes. After the second interview, I compared the two transcripts and was able narrow the themes to three categories. After the third interview, I had a clear sense of what I was looking for; the three categories appeared adequate to cover the community-distance learning relationship for these participants. Consistent properties of each category started to emerge. For example, all three participants mentioned a sense of isolation during the learning venture.

**Coding.** After completing each subsequent transcript, I was able to go through the data (generally on the second or third reading) and identify sections which further illustrated the three main categories. I noted categories and properties in the margins with pencil and highlighter markers.

**Memoing.** As I compared each interview transcript with the ones before it, questions or hunches about the data sometimes occurred to me. For example, at one point I wondered, “Do learners who have more formal education to begin with find the distance learning experience less foreign than those without a degree?” I noted these questions at the top of the corresponding transcript page.

**Theoretical sampling.** I sought additional participants whose experience could help me to answer emerging questions, or to confirm (or refute) properties that were unclear. For example, after writing the memo described above, I selected two participants with very different levels of formal education and
analysed their transcripts carefully to see if the degree of “foreign-ness” varied with educational background.

Recognition of saturation. The ninth interview yielded only two new properties; the tenth interview did not yield anything new. At this point, I decided that my categories had been saturated with data and that I was unlikely to uncover anything substantially more about my original research question.

Sorting. When the transcripts had been completely coded, I organized the properties into a descriptive paragraph about each of the three aspects of the distance learning experience. I then separated the properties, with one property to a page, and went back over the transcripts to locate quotes that would illustrate each property clearly. Using my word processor’s copy-and-paste feature, I placed supporting quotes under each property. Some properties were well supported by the data; in fact, a few properties were mentioned so frequently that I was able to effectively split the property into several more accurate or descriptive properties. Others, however, were supported so poorly that I suspect they were the result of my own prior opinions and not grounded in the data at all. In some cases it made sense to modify the description of a strong property by including aspects of a weak one, but in most cases I simply removed these weakly supported properties from the description.

Extracting themes. Several distinct themes emerged during the grounded theory analysis of this data. In general, participants’ primary communities appeared to influence the distance learning experience in three main ways: (a) in
the impetus for undertaking a formal learning programme by distance; (b) in the learning venture itself while underway; and, (c) in the impact on the participant's career and other aspects of life. In effect, the community mediated the distance learning experience at these three stages in learners’ journeys.

The results are presented in four sections. The first section illustrates the distinct community context for this study. The remaining sections describe the three ways in which this community context influenced participants’ distance learning experiences.

**Participants’ Views of their Communities**

During the first part of each interview, participants described their communities geographically and in terms of the people and communities of practice encompassed. They also identified community advantages and issues and discussed the role of education in the community.

**Geographical Location**
Participants were first asked to think about their community in terms of those people with whom they communicate on a regular basis. In spite of this rather general context for community, most participants described a community very much rooted in a geographical location. For example, when invited to “tell me a little about your community,” one woman identified people in town: “primarily the colleagues at work, also the ladies at the gym that I go to, the folks that I see at church, members of the community in various businesses that I use and shop at.”

One male participant described a somewhat larger community, still very much defined by geography:

We raised our family here and some are already educated, married, and moved on. While the family number is dwindling, this is still home . . . My clients are anywhere in the East and West Kootenays. As I said, this area has been home base . . . And the major group of friends is here, too.

After identifying this primary community, usually by connecting it with a place-name, all participants referred to it throughout the interview as home.

Communities of Practice

Although all participants identified a non-metropolitan geographical location as their community home, each one also described more than one community of practice within (and at times extending beyond) that geographical location. Respondents had no difficulty describing communities within their
community, spontaneously using pencil and paper to draw overlapping, interlocking or concentric circles:¹

There's a little diagram that we've done in some of the social work classes where you draw yourself as a circle and you draw lines to [those] who are closest to me and most significant to me; I'll do that first ring here. That would be my partner and my sons. Then friends; probably 4 to 6 people, mostly women . . . And then there's sort of a middle ring of people, a second level of people whom I only know superficially, and have what I call adult relationships with. That's like people in the bank, stores where I shop, that sort of thing, combined with people with whom I communicate with in my activities of interest. And then there are people who are very close to me emotionally but live very far away.

Family first, for sure, and that is quite a small number. The next group, of course, is all my clients. Family aside, running a small business my clients are vitally interested in me, and when I'm getting there, and my schedule . . . After that it would be clients and business associates.

My community is made up of many different spheres. It's like bubbles around a circle. One community is my church, my spiritual life. Another community is my business, another community is my school, and another community is just friends – and that encompasses all four. That's how I view my community.

In a non-metropolitan community, these communities of practice are often tightly interwoven. It is almost impossible to do anything anonymously, because what one does in one community of practice is bound to affect most of the other communities of practice in ones life, as this participant explained:

¹ Note: When a series of quotes is presented, the series represents quotes from a variety of sources and not one long quote from a single participant.
I think there’s interaction, overlapping interaction between working group communities, administrative communities, funding communities, and social communities, and I think that as we live in an environment that is relatively small – we don’t have 100,000 people that live in our population, we have 20,000 people that live in our population – who we may be having dinner with one night and may actually be somebody that is in their professional life, a funder, and in their personal life maybe a support.

All participants noted a number of characteristics of their rural communities; both benefits and differences ensue from this community context.

**Rural Community Benefits and Problems**

Participants agreed that the rural community lifestyle results in a quality of life significantly different from an urban one, and they consistently rated their lifestyle as better than what they could expect in “the city”:

I never liked the big city and Calgary was getting bigger and bigger all the time. So I moved to the smaller centre. . . . I prefer it here, I’m comfortable here. I’m out of the rat race, the important business lunches, the high-stress meetings . . . I don’t have to do that, I’ve done it. I don’t want to go there again.

We seem to be hidden (in the Kootenays). And we like that; you know, that’s why we’re here in lots of ways, because we don’t want to be forever having to run to keep up. It’s definitely a lifestyle thing.

One woman spoke in a wistful, affectionate tone when describing her home community:

My community of Crawford Bay is very small, very tight knit and intricate. There are a lot of people that live there that were there when I was growing up and a very integral part of my family and my social network, and a lot of those people are still there.
Although participants were quick to point out the benefits of living in a non-metropolitan community, they were equally quick to point out that a rural lifestyle presents challenges. The isolation of rural communities results in problems that are qualitatively different from those of urban communities. While talking about community problems and the issues affecting the future of his community, one participant identified a very concrete problem, familiar to anyone living in an isolated area: “First we need a good airport. And then if we get a good airport, we need decent air services.”

Others described problems of a more political or psychological nature:

We’re all affected by the economy and globalization and the new provincial government and their ultra-conservative policies. . . . So we will be affected by the economy, and we will be even more geographically isolated than we ever were, because of the way the economy’s going. They’re basically centralizing all the investment of money and energy into the big urban centres. So I think we’re going to have our strings cut even more than we already have.

When you’re isolated in a small rural community – as we are – you don’t know that you have alternatives. . . . You get into a rut, and maybe it’s not a very nice rut but at least it’s comfortable. You can anticipate what the problems are going to be and you just really don’t know what else is out there.

Several participants noted the community’s history of economic reliance on resource-based industry and how that economic foundation is now shifting:

What is the future of this community? Well, first of all, I think the decline in our resource base is going to be long-term, even though I am primarily a resource based company. And I think you will see fewer and fewer jobs per whatever unit, whether it be wood or coal, or whatever being out there available for workers. So that end of things is going to slow down. . . . I think that year round tourism, four season tourism is going to be one of
the mainstays, if it is not already, for this community. Granted it doesn’t offer the same level of remuneration that the resource based jobs will, but it offers more of them.

Well, the logging has pretty well gone from this area and the mine has now closed down in Kimberley . . . there’s not too much that this community’s got unless we can expand the tourism.

If you look at the traditional work history, the demographics, whether it is the East or West Kootenays, you got out of high school and it was the Mother Cominco or the Mother CFI or Mother coal mine gave you a job at 17 and green as grass, and your one glimmer of hope was to get through 45 years of employment and get your pension at the end of the day, without getting trod on or killed or somehow buggered up in the mine. . . . (But) those are not the best jobs out there anymore, because they have turned out to be finite.

As the participant above noted, this resource-based history has brought about a community culture in which young people could choose (or were even encouraged) to leave school prior to graduation and enter the workforce. Up until even a decade ago, people were able to earn a good wage without much formal education.

**The Perceived Role Of Education for Adults In Resource-Based, Non-Metropolitan Communities**

Traditionally, these communities have not placed a strong value on continuing formal education in adulthood. One woman explained:

You know we went through, when we graduated, if we graduated with Grade Twelve it was exciting because when I was going to school the most you really needed was Grade Ten, and you could get very good jobs, especially in this area. And because the college wasn’t here then a lot of people didn’t go on to university; it was too expensive, so in this geographical area that still seems to be a predominant way of thinking.
A number of other participants agreed that this resource-based mind-set continues to influence attitudes toward education in adulthood:

I don’t hear a lot of people who are in positions and have been for some length of time, jobs, saying, “Oh I should be thinking about upgrading so I can keep my job or upgrading so I can be prepared in case I lose my job.” I’m not seeing that kind of thing in this community where you do see it more in larger communities.

For the most part they’ve moved in a community where they’re not openly receptive to education because . . . you’ve got to go and get out there and be a productive member of the workforce.

[Some] folks tend to utilize the [college] facility only if they are coming to wit’s end, or there is pending job loss or something. There is not a real plan for learning. It’s almost, “Holy cow, what do I do now? Aha! I’ll go to the college!” And good as that is, it is really ad hoc learning, short term learning. There is not a life-long commitment to learning. . . . So how do you instill in a person that learning is more necessary, but it is not necessarily the same as a trip to the dentist? How do you take the big needle out of that?

A number of participants commented on the community perception that education is primarily an activity for youth:

It’s not part of your life experience in downtown Kimberley to know a full-time university student. That’s an alternative lifestyle. It’s a new-fangled thing, like a push-button telephone as compared to a rotary dial. It’s new, and therefore a little frightening, and I don’t understand it and I’m not sure I want to. It’s out of our life experience and has been . . . until now, technology enables us to do it by distance ed. So I pass a lot of people on the street in Cranbrook or Marysville or Yahk who would look and see a middle-aged woman and think that I work in the kitchen at the hospital or something and would never guess that I am a full-time student.

Most of the people I know don’t seek out education, be it ballroom dancing or something else at this stage in their lives. . . . When people talk in Cranbrook about the College, it’s usually in reference to their children having gone there, but they don’t go there. . . . I think a lot of people, unfortunately, by the time they’ve reached middle age, feel that they’re educated.
Nevertheless, almost all participants described significant learning events that they had experienced in adulthood. When asked to “tell me about a successful educational or learning venture that you have undertaken as an adult,” only one participant missed the question entirely. Four participants described formal learning situations (e.g., a programme in college), four others related workplace learning experiences, and the other two participants described learning acquired through participation in community groups (one participant reported a choir directorship experience; the other described participation on a community health board as his most significant learning experience).

**Current Community Attitudes towards Education**

When thinking about community support for education, almost all participants mentioned that a narrow, limited view of education was a pervasive component of the community culture. When asked, “How do the people in your community support education?” one woman replied bluntly: “Tax dollars. It’s the only thing I can say, for most of them.” Another participant remembered attending planning sessions when a new apprenticeship programme was being considered for the college. He recalled arguing with a number of committee members who wanted a curriculum tailored only to their workplace labour needs, and not to the broader, more generic learning goals of the trade. Still another participant modelled the community culture by referring to common sense and education as if they were two very separate things:
It’s good to use the education, but use common sense, too! To me, if you can mix the two and find a balance between the two – that’s a hard one; I don’t know that I’ve been successful myself.

Deeply ingrained attitudes result in a small communicative space for adult continuing education in the community. Participant reactions suggested that the problems of non-metropolitan communities do not clearly or obviously lend themselves to solution by education. When asked, “What role could education play in bringing about change in your community?” most participants paused at some length before answering. One participant eventually responded, “I don’t think very much. I can’t imagine what kind of education could bring about a change.” Other participants agreed:

How will education help? Unless we can start attracting some of the modern technologies, like the computer industries, I can’t see that education is going to make a major plus or minus.

Well, tourist-based industries don’t really need education. Any guys that are going to be waiters, guides, outfitters, chambermaids . . . so you don’t really want education because as soon as you’ve got education they don’t want to do those jobs.

One participant, however, did make a direct connection between the increase in unemployed resource-based workers and the need for more education:

I think that [education] has to be a priority, because . . . the population we are dealing with is a population that needs skill enhancement, education and training. We can’t expect a single parent, regardless of gender, to go out and support their family if they do not have the skills necessary to do anything besides minimum wage work. And if the government is expecting people to get off of the system that has supported them as a means of
living, then they are going to have to put more money into training. I think there is a direct correlation: if they want to decrease the population on BC Benefits, there has to be an increase of dollars going into training.

The Value of Credentialling in the Community

The community may view education as an activity for youth, as immiscible with common sense, or as a “trip to the dentist”; nevertheless, the community does value the credentials associated with education. In many cases, this may reflect a trend towards “provincialization”: the credential is required in the urban community and due to standardization of the job description throughout the province, the credential becomes a requirement in the rural community as well – even though the education associated with the credential will not necessarily be applied, valued, or even welcomed. One participant recalled a previous job:

I was hired for that job at Heart and Stroke because of my business background, because of my diploma in Business Admin. that I had got here. . . . But when that job ended, I realized that I hadn’t done anything, I hadn’t used any of the accounting or even the computer stuff that I’d learned while getting that diploma.

When asked if he felt that formal training in the trades was considered important, another participant answered:

You view it as a necessity, to get past the apprenticeship. At the end of the day you have a card in your pocket or a certificate on the wall that says you are a journeyperson.

One participant, who was a human resource development officer, noted both the extent and the unfairness of the requirement for credentialling in her line of work:
You look at job descriptions: “a Master’s degree is preferred.” You know what? Ninety percent of the job ads that come across my desk say “Master’s degrees are preferred.” But life experience counts . . . for some of the people I know who could do that job probably just as proficiently as somebody who holds a book degree.

Participants all identified themselves as rural residents, familiar with the advantages, challenges, and educational context of their communities. This context contributes to their reasons for participating in distance education, which are described in the next section.

The Impetus for Undertaking a Formal Learning Programme by Distance

Against this backdrop – this unique community situation – in which the economy is shifting from a resource base to something else, many residents are at least beginning to contemplate other ways of making a living. The participants interviewed in this study, for example, decided to undertake a formal programme of education. These participants revealed both professional and personal reasons for beginning such a programme.

Professional Growth

The reason participants most often mentioned (and usually mentioned first) was to improve or to stabilize their position within their community of practice. For example, when recalling his decision to undertake a certificate programme, one participant said, “At the time I sort of thought I was in a career
and that this would be advancing my career credentials, so in that way, I
guess . . . It was strictly a career thing.”

Another woman stated that she started a degree programme

. . . basically just to stay competitive in my job. I was very aware that the
college was changing its focus to include faculty with more education
rather than less and so word was going around that we needed a
minimum of a bachelor’s degree whereas before experience quite often
just spoke for itself.

Similarly, a tradesman was seeking to increase his competitive advantage in
business:

I was looking for a career change, and I kept coming back to something
trades-related, plumbing, steamfitting, whatever. I thought: “OK, you’re
going to start a company. What is going to make this company different?
More attractive? Why are they going to call me rather than M&K Plumbing
or Dean’s Plumbing or Day’s Plumbing?” And I realized that my present
tickets coupled with an Industrial Gas ticket was going to be the focus of
my business. So I chose it to give me that edge.

Although most participants mentioned the desire for a specific credential,
some also mentioned the desire to benefit their community in some way:

Why am I doing this? At [the distance learning institution] they encourage
you to write very succinctly, to write very concisely, and to write so people
can understand it and use the knowledge generated. It’s not about being
so scholarly that you’re put on a pedestal by your peers. It’s about doing
action research that can be of some value to society.

Several participants were especially eager to discuss the leadership
needs in their community of practice and their desire to play a stronger
leadership role; in essence, to move closer to the centre of the community of
practice. One participant, who has been involved in business for all of her professional life, hinted at her increasing role in leadership as the primary impetus for choosing her distance programme:

I chose [this leadership programme] because I believe that we in our society are creating leaders. And often our leaders don’t know how to lead. . . . All our companies are flattening and people in these companies are being put in leadership positions that I don’t think they have been trained for or been educated for.

Similarly, another participant mused:

Maybe it will give me a little more reassurance about some of the stuff I want to do. As an example, it has reinforced the leadership. . . . It has reinforced that leadership is very critical in any organization, and probably a lot more in educational institutions than people think it should be.

**Personal Growth**

Although professional growth was the most common reason given for undertaking a programme of study, a number of participants mentioned personal growth as well:

I think I just really wanted to continue learning. I really like learning new things. And I think I didn’t feel I was disciplined enough on my own to just pick up a book and read it. I really needed some kind of reward at the end of that.

I chose this programme after about 5 years of research to find a programme that fit what I felt was my personal desire for post-secondary education.

I wanted a challenge; I wanted something to do with my life. And more than anything else, I wanted something for me. For once in my life, at my age, I wanted something for me. Not for the job, not for this or for that; a challenge for me.

I have always wanted to get a graduate degree so accomplishing this will
give me a sense of achievement – even if it doesn’t do anything for my career or my finances.

One participant, who had accumulated some credits towards a degree in Information Technology, also felt the pull to complete his degree programme. However, the drawbacks to leaving the community outweighed the initial impetus he had felt; he decided that investing in the more advanced credential would turn out to be more a sacrifice than an opportunity:

If I do manage to complete the degree, what would I do here? There are no jobs in Creston for somebody with those qualifications. I would have to leave the community in order to use my education. And I don’t want to do that. I like living in a rural community and Creston is a great place to raise a family, to have kids. My partner and I have discussed it and we don’t think that the lifestyle change would be worth it.

No Other Alternative

After having made the decision to begin a formal programme of study, all participants chose a distance programme because they felt strongly that they had no other educational alternative – leaving their community (and often their source of employment) was just not realistic. When asked, “What made you decide to take a programme by distance?” three participants replied:

Well, with our situation at that time, nothing else would have worked very well. I really didn’t want to leave my family at that time.

There are no universities in our area so a distance programme was the only option. I did my business undergrad through a full time campus based programme. I went to [the University] during the week and came home to Sparwood on the weekends. This was a hectic lifestyle and would not be possible now with a young child at home.

I needed two courses, six credits. I really didn’t want to uproot and go to
Lethbridge or Calgary or UBC or UVic for just two courses. I’ve got a very nice house, I own the house, it’s full of my stuff. If I move I’ve got to pack all my stuff into storage and rent out my house, and go on campus, go into lodging somewhere. I’ve got my medical support system all set up here, I’d have to re-establish that wherever else I go. The thought of having to move just wasn’t in it.

I asked one participant, “Why didn’t you choose a residential programme?” and she replied emphatically:

I can’t. No. Not if I want to continue with my marriage and my job! There are people who have done it, and the penalty has been real big, so I am not going to go there.

The physical accessibility of a distance programme was important for all participants. Most also mentioned other accessibility factors in their choice of a distance programme.

Cost and Accessibility

Cost was a factor for most participants. The cost of leaving the community was seen to be prohibitive, whether for 2 years or for 2 months. The cost of tuition alone constituted a barrier for some. Many participants appreciated the financial rationale of a distance programme:

First of all, it is cost-effective. Even though the programme itself was I think $1100, I then spent another probably $1000 on additional resources from companies that would help me learn this, not easier, but round off my body of knowledge. And then about $1000 to go down for two weeks. So it was cost effective, first of all, rather than going down for that two-month period.

I was living in Crawford Bay at that time, and I was working a full time job at the golf course, and I figured that I could do these correspondence
courses and still maintain this full time job and school work. . . . I am a single woman, I need to work. I have bills to pay just like everybody else, how can you just not work?

I mean, the courses were $700 apiece, they weren’t cheap, but when I weighed that against having to take the time off and go and do the degree – to me, they were almost free in comparison to what that would have cost me. Small price to pay.

Besides cost considerations, academic accessibility was an important issue for a number of learners. Rural learners, who often may lack a traditional academic background, are restricted to programmes that are academically accessible. When asked why she had chosen a particular distance education institution, one participant answered bluntly “The truth was, number one: I could afford it; and number two: they’d take me.” Another participant appreciated academic flexibility:

For one thing, [the institution] gives you credit for having a brain, for having acquired education outside credit-granting institutions. They really encourage challenging exams, challenging courses, and prior learning assessment. They really encourage you to do that.

However, not everyone agreed that openness in admissions was a good thing. One participant did not want to see the value of the credential “watered down”:

The entry requirements are a real shame. Almost 30% of the students have been admitted to the programme without an undergrad degree. Some people have even been allowed in without a diploma or any kind of formal training. I think this really lowers the reputation of the programme.
Because there are fewer programmes available by distance than in a more traditional, residential format, a number of participants elected to enroll in an educational programme that was not quite what they were looking for. One participant explained why she chose a distance programme in an entirely unexpected field:

[The distance education institution] sent me a pamphlet about this new degree and I think if they hadn’t sent that to me I would have never considered it seriously. And as I sat down and read through it I realized that I never had to leave my home, I never had to go to [the institution], I never had to go anywhere; the idea of completing the whole thing from home and I just thought, why shouldn’t I? . . . That was kind of odd actually because I initially was looking for something in Sociology or Social Work or in the field that I teach in.

Other participants described a sort of compromise decision:

I thought, Well, this is something I think I can do because it’s within the budget I have, it’s convenient as I don’t have to go away. . . . Simply because it was convenient. I didn’t have to go to Victoria.

It’s an MBA, in Executive Administration. I did not have the choice to specialize in finance, or other aspects; so we have a couple of courses or more specific to educational leadership or educational learning. So it’s geared a little more towards education but still it’s . . . I wanted to do something for me, and when it came down to it – this programme was here, it was present, it was on the top of my desk, I had read about it; and so I said: “OK, let’s do it.”

“Doing It”: The Learning Venture

Regardless of the reason why they chose a distance learning programme, all participants described common themes in the learning experience itself. The five themes were: feelings of alienation, a sense of isolation, communication
issues regarding curriculum and academic work, concerns about time and
structure, and advantages to being a distance student.

**Feelings of Alienation**

One woman provided an emphatic summary of her relationship with a
distance learning institution:

> It was horrible. It was absolutely horrible. When I first talked to them, they
were all happy, and positive, and then the further I got into it, as soon as
they get your money, they have this whole other attitude towards you. And
yes I did get money back for book deposits and microscope deposit, I did
get that money back, but it seemed like it took forever, I actually had to
take the microscope back, personally myself, and it was like I was this
foreign alien walking into the school. It took 45 minutes to return a
microscope that should have taken 5.

Although her experience was extreme, other participants described similar
feelings of alienation. The exasperation in the following participant’s voice, for
example, stemmed from the fact that her distance learning institution and her
workplace were so different. She was unable to negotiate approval from her
academic advisor for a course project to be conducted in her workplace:

> I mean it’s the world of work. The bottom line is, this is where I work and
where I live, and if [the distance learning institution] cannot make enough
of an effort to find out how that applies without saying, “no,” then that is
not my issue, it’s theirs. Learning shouldn’t be frustrating to the point
where people develop complacency.

Another participant accepted that the differentness had a more personal basis:

> You know yourself going through a distance programme that it’s
completely different from an undergraduate degree where you’re on-
campus. It’s completely different; you’re at a different point in your life, you
have different expectations of what life’s supposed to offer, you have
different personal and professional goals.

In fact, the experience of every participant was coloured by a pervasive
sense of foreignness. This foreignness resulted in a sense of isolation when
participants tried to bring their educational experience into their primary
community or interacted with the distance learning institution, although the
isolation was partially overcome by active communication with the instructor and
by extensive use of communications technology.

Isolation and Communication

Alone in the primary community. Participants considered their
experience to be outside of usual community discourse. They felt the effects of
the small communicative space for their education in a number of ways. For
example, most participants lived with a partner but these partners generally had
no personal familiarity with advanced education. One participant described how
she was unable to talk about her learning at home:

In the first year, when I was starting, [my husband] set up a room
downstairs and he would bring me breakfast, lunch and supper and all this
kind of stuff, so I could just spend hours down there by myself just reading
and writing and grumbling to myself. It was good, because his educational
background was not the same as mine and so to be able to discuss the
topics with him, I couldn’t have done it. Or to sort of try to work things out
with him, try to work some of the philosophies out with him or whatever it
was, it was out of his field so there was no way he could have been
helpful and he knew that.
Participants also described a general lack of verbal support within their communities of practice for their educational venture. This woman described the difficulty she experienced when trying to talk about what she was learning with the community beyond her immediate co-workers:

A lot of people that are in that other community don’t really understand where I’m coming from, they don’t really – education in an adult sense, post secondary, taking courses, – they don’t get it. . . . One example is the lady that I know quite well, and I was telling her what I was doing with the course, and how theoretical it is and frustrated I am with theory about adult learning, and, well, she doesn’t . . . She’s never done post secondary education. What I’m learning in the information that has been given to me to study, when I try to explain exactly what this is all about to someone who’s not been stretched beyond Grade 12, perhaps, has not really had to look and reflect and then come forward and tell me what that process was like, it’s just beyond their comprehension because they just haven’t got the skills. They are not used to looking at themselves in that way, and so I just don’t talk about it to people in that big community.

Another participant felt that the nature of the programme itself may have been to blame:

My boss at the time, he really didn’t care one way or another. . . . There was no contact really with [my workplace] community in doing that course. . . . It was about fundraising. Everybody in the building hated fundraising, distanced themselves from it as much as they possibly could. There was no interest.

When asked, “Can you talk about your learning experience with other people in your community?” one participant reported feeling sometimes supported, yet sometimes actively discouraged:

To just a couple of them. I don’t know . . . maybe not all of [my colleagues] are aware of my course. . . . There are a few others who know, too, like my crew knows that I am doing this course. They don’t know exactly what
the course is about, but they know that I’m taking the programme, that it’s an MBA. So some people say, “How are you doing, how are you making out?” Other people say, “Why are you doing that? It’s a waste of your time.” Everybody has their opinion.

Only one participant felt strongly supported by her community of practice:

I don’t think I would have ever attempted [the distance programme] if I hadn’t been in this environment. So, even though there were some people in the [workplace] who thought I was crazy for doing it in the discipline I was doing it in, it was still supported by people asking how I was doing and how close I was getting and then some celebrating with me as I finished courses and so on.

**Alone in the academic community.** Most learners described an inability to bring their educational experience within their community of practice; to communicate their learning venture within the primary community. They also found it difficult, at times, to communicate with the distance learning institution.

Academic regulations and processes, with their accompanying paperwork, were often viewed as confusing, excessive, and sometimes unreasonable. A number of participants recalled being confused about registration procedures:

I guess getting registered for them was a little bit of a – well, quite a task. I had to go back to [institutions A] and get my transcripts; I had to get [institutions B] transcripts, because some of the courses are transferable. So that was a big job and having to find out how to go about getting this and connecting with the right people. That was somewhat stressful, and there was a cost attached, not big, but there’s all these details that you have to do . . . Makes me crazy, but oh well. The hoops.

I was never very good at the administrative procedures thing. I was kind of baffle by what form you have to fill in, where are you supposed to sign, that kind of stuff. I recall there was some sort of kafuffle about I’d not filled something in or not got it in on time or some deadline for something or other went by and I hadn’t noticed or hadn’t understood.
Another participant’s experience was different because he was able to connect with a familiar community of practice:

I dealt with people specific to the trades programme [at the distance institution], so even though registration was through their regular office almost immediately you were sidelined over to the trades folks, and these are all people who have worked in the trades, so they all know the antics of pipefitters and plumbers and ironworkers and electricians and all of that, so there wasn’t too much you could say or do that would faze them. It was just like walking into a job-site, really. They knew why you were doing what you were doing.

Others recalled the frustration of trying to understand processes connected with assignments:

And even like the paperwork to send in with assignments. If you didn’t fill it out exactly, they would send it back and your assignment wouldn’t get marked. You would have to like re-fill out all this paperwork and everything, and then send the assignment back, which you pay for by yourself, by the way, to send these assignments back, and then it would get marked.

The frustration comes from . . . everything you are learning culminates in this final project, and while that is a natural kind of expectation of what is going to happen, all of these little roadblocks that are put in place in between the completion of your graded course work and the beginning of your project work is almost insurmountable, because this isn’t met, that isn’t met, so it becomes more of a political battle than it is a learning process.

In some cases, the overlapping communities of practice within the home community presented unique problems. One participant described the difficulty in trying to complete an assignment which, in essence, would have required him to straddle two communities of practice: he would have had to ask a business peer to play the role of an educational mentor:
Some of the questions we had to write on, you had to be able to go to people in the work community and ask them questions. And I said, “Forget that; I’m not going to run around asking people stupid questions.” I mean, some of the friends I know in the business community; it would be like going to [Bob Smith] and saying, “Well, how does your office run?”

Another participant had a hard time getting a letter of support from an acquaintance whose influence in her life extended across two communities of practice:

You need to be very cautious and politically correct with how much pressure you can put on, because these are people who are in your professional community and can have an impact in a variety of different ways. So not only are you needing their support in an academic sense, you are still needing to continue this working relationship in a professional capacity.

Even after they worked out ways to communicate with the distance learning institution, participants seldom felt themselves to be a part of the academic community. One woman’s attempt to connect with her instructor met with a blunt refusal:

And even the science instructor, you know I asked her, I said, “Is there any way if I am having that many problems, I’m not that far from Nelson, I do go there, I have to shop there when living in Crawford Bay, is there any way I can meet you, have lunch with you or something, and ask you some questions?” And she just said, “Oh, I don’t like to get that personal with my students.”

Most distance learning institutions actively promoted a cohort arrangement among students. However, when asked to reflect on the sense of community they felt with their learning cohort, most participants did not feel that
the arrangement had been very successful. One participant replied, flatly: “I don’t feel like I’m part of a group. There’s me and this instructor and a book.” Another participant commented on the limited nature of her cohort relationship: “I find the lack of interaction with my teammates to be difficult. I don’t feel a real bond with them. We are work teams but we are not true teams.”

One participant contemplated the reasons why his cohort was taking so long to coalesce:

Well, we are part of a team . . . These last two courses we’ve done, until the end of April or so, we end up communicating only about every two weeks. . . . Our team is still in the process of becoming a team. We’re still in the formation stage. But it’s been a year; it will be a year in July. There’s various reasons . . . some of the people didn’t realize what it would be like; they thought that the team would be easier to work with together. Some people would rather be on their own.

One participant, while talking about her learning venture, spontaneously recalled our discussion about community earlier in the interview:

Well, what I should say is when talking about my community, I have forgotten the community I am supposed to be linking to through all of this. And that is the community of other students, who are taking this course, like I am, who are spread out through the whole world, and the only way we really communicate and keep our community together is by going to the [distance learning institution] web page. Picking up on each other’s correspondence, picking up on what our instructors are giving us as guidelines for something, but to me they don’t feel like a community. They are just a name and a place where they come from, but they are, they should be, I’m thinking, my primary community for all of this.

For still another participant, who had completed his distance course some time ago, the sense of community with his programme cohort left no impact at
all: “I really don’t remember very much about them. I never met them, except on the phone. . . . I can’t even remember now if there was any encouragement to form a community with them, the people in the course.”

A couple of participants, however, did feel a sense of community with their distance cohort. One learner, when asked, “What’s been the most rewarding aspect of your distance learning experience?” said:

I would have to say the friendships that have developed over it, with fellow learners. There’s a real sense of community that comes with people who have shared that experience.

For another participant, the sense of community that developed during her distance programme still continues, in part:

A lot of us graduated within two years of when we could have graduated. So we saw each other at graduation and we saw each other at some [professional] conferences and stuff like that. And some of us still stay in touch.

**Feelings of isolation.** Unable to bring the learning experience within their primary community and unable to connect in a meaningful way with the academic community, participants reported feeling alone in their learning venture and frustrated by the lack of face-to-face communication. Many participants mentioned that this sense of isolation was the most difficult aspect of their learning experience. When asked, “What’s the hardest part about taking a course by distance?” several learners mentioned the lack of peer-to-peer interaction:
The isolation. There’s nobody else to bounce ideas with. You don’t sit in a classroom and shoot things back and forth and argue and philosophize and hear other people’s perceptions. So if I’m off-base or not understanding something, there’s no-one to share with.

But the hardest part was when I’m sitting at home and I’m reading all this junk and you’re reading it but you’re only getting your own personal point of view. When we’re sitting in class, we read it at home and then we come to class and you’re working over it and everyone else has a different aspect they’ve read out of it.

I’m not primarily a visual learner. I’m an auditory learner, and I like to dialogue. I like to discuss and I like to communicate. And I like to have that interaction and throw an idea out and have some discussion around it, and if my point of view changes, I think that’s just great. And I find that working on the distance education via the computer mediated communication doesn’t give me the interaction that is something that I yearn for. It’s been a real big challenge for me to maintain my interest without having that dialogue.

Another participant missed the encouragement of a peer group:

It was so hard just to . . . you know, you’re sort of by yourself and you get these deadlines but just the loneliness of it . . . let’s take the books and go off. . . . I’m not a very good study-er anyway so, any excuse for a diversion, that works for me. It was hard to focus on the work without having somebody outside in that learning thing kind of encouraging me along.

Several others found it especially difficult to connect without the aspect of direct face-to-face interaction. When asked, “What’s the most frustrating aspect of taking a course by distance?” a participant answered: “Not being with the people. Not being face to face, not being part of a community that I was supposed to be part of. I guess not having people to look at, to listen to, to get to know as people. The human part, the real part.”

The following learners missed the added dimension of body language:
I found it hard at first to be authentic and open up to who I was on-line with people. It’s one thing to be authentic and open when you’re looking someone in the eye and can see their body language, it’s another thing to be authentic and open when you’re typing on a page. . . . Trying to communicate who I was only with writing and not with tone of voice or body language was a challenge, and I think it would challenge everyone. And learning to trust that process takes a little time.

It goes to your learning style. You have to work on your own sometimes, you have to do this. . . . but when you need to have people to discuss things with, close by, you don’t have it. I can read facial expressions and body language – so most people I can say something and you’ll get a reaction so you can adjust your discussion. You can grasp something, the tone of voice, and you can change it. When you’re on-line, you don’t see that. So to me, with total distance learning, that’s a disadvantage. So the biggest challenge I find is the lack of face-to-face, the lack of actual conversations with the people.

One participant, however, didn’t really expect to become part of an academic community and noted that her experience was not at all unique:

I don’t feel lonely, and quite honestly, I don’t have time to get into anything with anyone. They have a chat room available, and to date, no-one has used the chat room. There’s two huge groups of us taking this course. There’s so many of us they divided us into the two groups, A and B, and there are about 30 of us in this one group. . . . No-one’s gone to the chat room yet, because you can tell how many hits there are: zippo, yesterday when I looked. And I’m thinking, “Isn’t this interesting? Now why would that be? Are we afraid to get in there? We don’t know how to get in there? We don’t have time to get in there?” What’s your guess? I don’t think people have time. I think people have a life outside of the [distance] course, and you just need to maintain that.

**Importance of communication with the instructor.** Even for those learners for whom peer-to-peer interaction was not especially important, good communication with the instructor was considered critical. Several participants agreed that the hardest part of taking a course by distance was
trying to learn the subject matter without somebody in front of you, laying it out in black and white. I am a very visual learner, and not having that guidance per se, someone to say that’s right, that’s wrong, and trying to take this information and put it in your head.

Even though I don’t need somebody standing over me, instructing me or lecturing, it is a lonely venture, and I think that was the hardest part, because I think there are any number of things that you read and you are learning and you think, “Now hang on here a minute, what do they mean by this?” And it is not worth a phone call or an email or a quick fax to Vancouver and hopefully get a response, but you muddle through it and read some more and go back to it and try to determine what the text actually means, so sometimes you are literally crying for some human interaction and it is just not there, at least not immediately. It takes a little more concentration to get past the stumbling blocks.

Still others mentioned the frustration of trying to contact their instructor:

With an instructor or a teacher or a professor or anything you’ve got in a classroom, they’re actually opening up and you’re discovering that. But sitting at home, you’re not; you got to find that for yourself. Because you can’t get hold of your tutor. In fact, my one tutor was in Paris and Switzerland and wherever the hell else he was. I can’t get hold of him at a moment’s notice to ask a question. And he’s the only one I’m getting feedback from.

And they were changing instructors and one left and then I couldn’t get hold of another and it took me like six weeks to do one assignment, where it should have taken me two. And I could never get hold of this woman and I was working full time at that time as well.

For another participant, clear access to the instructor resulted in a sense of being supported:

They have tutor hours two or three times a week. And they state those at the outset. So you can call them, you know, Wednesday morning or Thursday evening or one or the other or both. It’s about two hours at a time, and they stay near the telephone and their students can call them. I’ve never had trouble getting through and they’re always there. And if you email them, they guarantee that they’ll get back to you within 48 hours. So, they’ve been very supportive.
One participant mused that the lack of direct contact with the instructor was not always a negative thing.

When you are just talking to a voice on a line, you have no preconceived notions about who they are, what they look like, you have no idea whether you might like them socially or not, they are just a resource, and that is all you can consider them. . . . You didn’t have to be burdened with any preconceived notions of what a person was or is.

**Importance of communications technologies.** Because communication – both among learning peers and between learner and instructor – was identified as probably the most influential aspect of the learning venture, learners relied heavily on communications technologies and processes and were further frustrated when the technology failed or the instructor did not make adequate use of it:

[The instructor] couldn’t operate computers and therefore I would have to print out my stuff, mail it in . . . and it takes 12 days each way to where she was living. So I would send an assignment in and I wouldn’t know for twenty-four days what result I was getting. Which means you can read all the other stuff but until you get the first comments and feedback you don’t know if you’re on the right track or not. You’ve got to wait 24 days to get the darn stuff back. And then you get down and you write your next one and that’s another week, and send it off and wait another 24 days. This was the other thing, too: she’s got a computer but she sits and writes all this! I hate writing; if you’ve got a computer, why do you have to write it? She couldn’t even download these pictures. She couldn’t open my file with the diagram in, I had to mail it. [The other instructor] was great. I mean, he was in Paris and I could do my assignment on Word, email it to him at [the distance learning institution], he could mark it in Paris, email it back to me and I’d get it in four days. And that’s fantastic.

Some instructors grumbled about the email so we had to fax things to them rather than work with them on-line. We worked with each other on-line and they set up discussion groups on-line and so on for us, but they themselves were technophobes so we found that kind of thing interesting.
Good technical support was critical to learner satisfaction. When responding to the question: “What’s the most frustrating part about taking a course by distance?” a participant replied:

If you can’t communicate because the server’s down. . . . That’s what’s been the most frustrating is technical problems. However, I’ve learned to trust the computer desk. And I certainly didn’t when I started out, but I do now. Because they’ve always been able to fix what was wrong within an hour or two. . . . I mean, my computer just today, I couldn’t post to my discussion group. But I emailed the computer desk, they emailed right back; I emailed again, they emailed right back, finally phoned them and said this isn’t working. And he said “Let me walk you through it.”

One woman felt that although dealing with the internet technology (which had been relatively new at that time) had been the hardest part about taking courses by distance, it was also the most exciting aspect:

I think the hardest part because of the time that I started at was 1994, was the technology. The internet hardly existed, you know, in terms of the home user. . . . To us I mean it was exciting, we thought we were just the bee’s knees. . . . We were a small group that started, there was 36 of us I think and we were the pilot group and we spent a lot of time talking on the phone, whatever, with [the institution’s] computer techs and they were tremendously supportive, and we got very close with each other because we spent a lot of the time grumbling about the technology and not knowing how to use it, but we thought we’d flown to the moon and back.

**Issues about Curriculum and Academic Work**

Participants communicated with the distance learning institution, with their peers, and with their instructor: they also interacted with the learning material itself. Although most participants found the learning material to be interesting, coursework requirements often seemed vague and contradictory. Several
participants mentioned the difficulty of trying to understand what kind of work was required. When responding to the question, “What is the hardest part about taking a course by distance?” these participants said:

Trying to figure out what the instructor wants. How to show the instructor that I am learning what he feels I need to learn. Any particular perception of the course. That’s the hardest part.

Understanding what they want. I often read it and read it and read it, just can’t get it. And some days it’ll just click, and other days I just can’t get it.

I’ve talked with the lady on the phone personally, the instructor, a couple of times, and I had a specific question in mind: what exactly are you looking for? By the time I was finished, I was more confused than anything else. So at one point I said, “Well, I think that’s what she’s looking for so that’s the answer I’ll give.” When I got the results of the test, I thought maybe she was looking for something else after all. It was one of those things where you were never sure just what she was looking for.

Another participant felt that he had figured it out:

The work isn’t hard but the process is frustrating. All you have to do is apply it. . . . Take the principle or the theory and make a direct application to what you are doing and apply it to how they want it delivered.

Several participants mentioned that course work sometimes seemed excessive, unreasonable, or not relevant:

They seemed to want us to do a whole lot of reading that was probably not needed for being able to do the paper they wanted us to do. That would be the instructor, saying, “I want you to read all this, to research this.” I spent hours doing research on the web or reading something, and I asked: “Why?” When you start to question yourself . . . I would say that we had 20% too much writing, and too much reading.

We spent a lot of unnecessary time on communication skills training, time management, and leadership training. We are all supposed to be manager types so I think that these “courses” were a bit of a waste of time. . . . [The distance education institution] needs to provide more
specific training that will be useful in the field. Right now, it seems like we are basically “buying” our degree because we are only learning a lot of theory, not anything practical. . . . [We need to] have more interaction with business throughout the programme rather than just at the end.

Almost all participants commented on the somewhat foreign feel to the academic language required by their programme. In many cases, the requirement to use this language was felt to be an imposition. The requirement to demonstrate all learning by writing alone was frustrating for some:

They want written documents, papers on my learning. I was given the choice on the topic that I like to write about, and a project. . . . Projects aren’t particularly onerous right now, but when I think of how I would much rather prefer to respond to the assignment, I would like to show or talk about it. I would like to be asked questions. I would like to have someone say, “So tell me what you do. Let’s talk about it. Show me some of the things you have done. Videotape what you do in the classroom.”

[The instructors] demanded that we do things like Plato and then in 250 words answer the question. . . . For every extra word they deducted marks. You had to answer within 250 words or you’d go down a grade. And I think that was really strange for me. . . . I’ve heard people say, “When I first came on-line I didn’t want to look stupid so I looked up the biggest words and used them,” and boy, could you tell, because you couldn’t read what they were writing because you were looking for a dictionary to find out what they were talking about.

One participant, for whom English was not a first language, was particularly frustrated (and a bit resentful) about the kind of English required by his distance instructors:

Why write big long words in a book or a paper – I know that some of the words are because of my English language, some of them I still have to think about it and if I’m not sure, I look in the dictionary – but why use a whole bunch of other words that even a good English person has to think about it first? Well, you’re writing then for only a very minority of people. . .
. It’s not that they’re used by 60 or 70% of the people, the people that are the actual working force. So that’s why I say using those big words is not good. If you’re not going to use it commonly on your job . . . why have it?

**Time and Structure**

Dealing with the huge time commitment required of the distance programme was another defining aspect of the experience. The extent of this time commitment had a profound effect on the other communities of practice within some participants’ lives:

There is another fellow currently taking [the distance programme] now for his employer, because he trains for [a company in town] and he and I have discussed a few points and he is struggling too with the workload, maintaining a full time job and that.

My husband is mostly supportive of my schooling. However, he doesn’t really understand how much work and effort are required to do the MBA. He is sometimes resentful of the increased parenting responsibilities that are placed on him when I have to work on assignments. My friends and family don’t understand what I am taking and don’t know how much work is involved in my schooling.

I knew in advance what the expectations were, but having to fit in 15 hours per week per course was a challenge and quite surprising, for lack of a better word. . . . I don’t think you do have a life when you’re doing distance education. It’s a compromised lifestyle.

People living alone or without full-time work commitments reported a distinct advantage:

I was married at the time. Now, very fortunately my husband worked away, and so he wasn’t a nuisance! So I was able to come to work all day, go home and go straight to my computer and work right through the night if I needed to. I had two dogs, my house . . . and that was it. So I was able to spend as much time as I wanted to on-line.
So when I got back, in the first part of June, I essentially sat down, and I was unemployed at the time, so I was able to do this, for a minimum of 6 hours, most often 8 or 10 hours a day, and pored over this material. So I essentially did it in June, July, and the first week of August. Nine weeks. But that was my personal goal, and that was, like I say, a minimum of 6 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Given the serious time commitment required of the distance programme, learners appreciated structure and deadlines:

You’ve got six months to do it you know. Therefore, you sit down; you think: “Oh well, I can look after that next month, and next month.” Suddenly you realize, hell – you’ve got three months and three assignments to do.

I think the self-paced works well in some circumstances. At this level it may have worked extremely well for some people, at a Master’s level. It didn’t – it wouldn’t have worked well for me and it wouldn’t have worked well for many of us. . . . That did come up, and most of us said no, we like the semesters, we like working through with the group.

I like the whole semesterized thing, myself, because then you are working in the confines of those deadlines and you know that tomorrow you have a 1500 word essay that you have to have in, or if you don’t make prior arrangements with your instructor, you are going to lose marks.

However, participants especially appreciated the instructor’s willingness to be flexible about structure and deadlines, to provide accommodations for individual circumstances:

I did send [my instructor] an email yesterday explaining to him that I am taking a computer course for two weeks on top of my full time work, and would he grant me an extension, and he emailed me, “Yeah, not a problem. You have an extra week. Thanks for letting me know.” And I thought that was very gracious.

Advantages to Being a Distance Student
In spite of the isolation, frustration, and confusion, doing something outside of the community norm had its advantages. For a number of participants, being an active student while simultaneously participating in a community of practice carried a certain degree of prestige; a sense of being somewhat exotic. Many learners related the reactions of their community members while they were involved in the learning venture:

I was also doing something that no one really knew anything about, and that was kind of neat.

They thought it was pretty great that I had the courage to do it. . . . I think people tend to look at people differently especially when they are an older adult that goes back to school to continue their education, because I am trying to make my life better and I think people that I know in Crawford Bay can see that.

They admired my tenacity and my ability to learn. I think I surprised a few of them by passing it, because as I say, traditionally there was a very high failure rate.

[A colleague] knows I’m doing this, and he says, “Boy, you’ve got the guts to do it” and stuff like that.

I think my family and friends probably have more respect for me because I have chosen this approach to deal with unemployment and sort of a mid-life crisis or whatever you call it.

This pastor came up to me and said, “You’re taking the Master’s in Leadership and Training, will you help me understand how to inform leaders and empower them and things like this?”

The distance learning venture presented participants with both struggles and benefits. The impact of these experiences on participants’ lives is discussed in the next section.

The Impact on the Learner’s Career and Other Aspects of Life
Only five of the learners I interviewed had yet completed their distance programme (and of those five, three had completed quite recently – within the last year): this made it impossible to collect data about general long-term impacts from the distance experience. However, most of the participants had been involved in the experience long enough to speculate about how their educational venture might affect their future. In most instances, the effect was not necessarily what they had envisioned before they began. Participants reported different degrees of impact on their professional, personal and community lives.

**Impact on Professional Life**

Most participants began their educational programme in order to stabilize or improve their position within their community of practice. In some cases, the education changed their position, but not to the position or location that they had hoped for. When asked, “How do you see this distance learning opportunity changing your life and the community you move in?” one participant could not think of any substantial change, although he granted, “I’m not saying that maybe down the line it won’t help me; it’s possible . . .” A few other participants provided general summaries:

Hmm. . . . I think it didn’t happen when I graduated. I don’t think any particular thing happened when I finished the programme. It was growing when I was doing the degree . . . I think since I finished my degree, I really haven’t used it that much.

So far, there has not been any change in my life except that I am a lot busier and have no free time at all. As I mentioned, it is pretty unlikely that the MBA will affect my current work situation.
Many participants discovered that there are very few positions available to “well-educated” people in a small community:

I look at my own position. I get on the internet and I look at all the job postings and vacancies. I could get ten jobs tomorrow if I moved to Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have any trouble picking up at least ten jobs. Because of my qualifications and my knowledge and my experience. But I can’t pick up one in this district.

When you lose your job here where do you go, what do you do? You know there aren’t that many similar options in a community our size, so I think it’s something like that, it’s not like working at the college for a few years and saying, “Oh! I can move on to this next, you know, and I can still keep my home, and I can still keep my family intact and so on.” Where in other communities, larger communities, you can do that.

One participant, who was pursuing a career in nursing, knew from the start that there would be no place for her in her home community:

The closest hospital is in Nelson or Creston, and so I would, if I were to work in either one of those places, I would live in Nelson or Creston. I would not live in Crawford Bay and commute to work, not with the type of shift work and everything that I would be having to do. It would be almost impossible especially like during the winter with the roads and everything it just would not be feasible.

Another woman discovered that she would be unable to move up to a better position, but recognized that she was gaining a stronger voice in her community of practice:

Oh, I’m already treated differently, even when people find out that you’re in a programme that’s at a graduate level you’re treated differently. I think that people listen to you differently other than somebody who’s had lifelong experience in that area. . . . I mean, yes, they know what they’re talking about and they’ve lived it and they’ve experienced it, but they don’t have the piece of paper hanging on their wall that gives them the right to talk about that.
Several other participants suggested that they gained a stronger voice in the community of practice. One learner could see clearly that her bachelor’s degree would “put me into a professional community.” When asked how their learning experience might change their life or their community, two other participants gave long, thoughtful responses about the leadership issues in their community of practice and how they might become more involved in addressing those issues. Still another learner said:

With a Master’s, those two little initials behind my name . . . remember I said people need the security and trust? For some reason, you get some letters behind your name, and they think you know. Trust is generated. And there’s a willingness to consider my suggestions.

**Impact on Personal Life**

Although the impact on participants’ professional advancement may have been less than expected, the impact on personal lives was often more than expected. Most participants reported positive changes as a result of their educational venture:

I felt very, very proud of myself for being able to overcome those issues in technology. Very pleased. Yeah, I felt very blonde and very stupid at times too, because I seemed to be asking the same question a number of times, but I was determined.

Definitely it improved my status, by taking the course. I was able to say “Yeah, I’ve taken this course.” People not knowing what I’ve done, what the course involves, sort of automatically assumed that it’s “Whoa! Must be a good thing.” So your status goes up out of their ignorance.

I think that after that first year, maybe after the first semester, I felt very different about myself, personally. Much more capable of doing academic work. I think up to that point I had questioned it. . . . Once I started on this
journey with my Master’s degree I started to give myself more credit, I guess, is what it was.

Others gave a more ambivalent response:

Well, it’s a completion of my degree. So now that my degree’s finished I can go back to the workforce. Good or bad, whatever it is.

What has been rewarding is that each time I finish a course, I am one step closer to completing the programme. To be honest, if I knew that I was going to have a child and that the course really wouldn’t make a bit of difference to my work life, I probably would not have taken this particular programme. . . . So far, there has not been any change in my life except that I am a lot busier and have no free time at all.

Several participants commented on how the increased development of reflection during their educational venture had changed their lives:

It’s changed my whole worldview. I used to think that I was the only one like me, and I was afraid to look at any of my character traits, values, belief systems . . . I was afraid to look at all those things and I hadn’t investigated anything. Once I started, in my formal education, altogether, I began to understand that I was not alone, and that we’re all in this together and we’re just all doing the best we can. And I’m mainly much less judgmental, much more liberal. . . . I realize that it’s through the education that has exposed me to all these different lifestyles and values and belief systems and religions and urban-vs.-rural and . . . educating me about all the issues. So I’m able to look at it more easily now.

Looking at what adult learning is, is so different than what I thought two years ago. I thought I was just going to school and shifting from the high school mode into an institution like this where you have an instructor who’s the expert, who teaches you everything. You absorb like a little sponge and pass the test or whatever you do. No: that is not what adult education is all about. That’s what I’m learning in the information that has been given to me to study . . . I’ve slowed down, become more reflective. Look at my students differently, look at people that support them differently, be more critical of what I do.
Personal changes were not always completely positive. One participant, whose marriage fell apart during her Master’s programme, felt differently about the reflective practice she had developed:

I think this experience has enhanced my ability to really look at who I am, and I really have come to dislike the term “reflect.” Because we spent a lot of time reflecting on who we are, where we are, what we’re doing, where we want to go; and . . . You know I have changed; personally, there have been some significant changes in my life since starting the programme. So the reflection that happens didn’t only impact my professional career, but it impacted my personal life as well. . . . It caused a self-evaluation. Where am I, what am I doing, what am I doing personally, am I on the track that I feel I need to be on, am I in relationships that are self-fulfilling, or is it just becoming a routine?

Impact on the Community

Participants found it much easier to discuss (or to speculate about) personal and professional impacts than they did about impacts to their community – either to their primary community or any community of practice.

When asked, “Do you see this learning experience changing your community?” several participants replied:

Possibly but probably not for my community. I have to do an organizational consulting project (360 volunteer hours) for my final project. I was hoping to help out a local non-profit organization – so they may benefit in some way.

I think that it’s impacted me more than it’s impacted my community. Other than a hierarchical expectation, in general, when it comes to opportunities.
Theoretically, I suppose, if it improves my fundraising abilities, then that would help support my employer. But I don’t imagine [my workplace] made three cents off it, what I learned in that course. . . . What was being taught in the course, the culture in the course, was not supported. It was supported philosophically by [my workplace]; everybody there said “Oh, that’s a good idea” but in practice, no.

In this chapter I have described my research process, participants’ perceptions about their communities, and the three main themes in their responses: their reasons for taking a distance course, their experience while taking it, and the impact it has had. In the next chapter, I discuss how these three themes can be related in a tentative theory about rural community interaction in distance education, and the recommendations suggested by such a theory.
CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to answer the question: What is the relationship between rural learners’ primary community and their distance learning experience? Through interviews with 11 distance learners in the East Kootenay region of British Columbia, I explored learners’ concepts of community, their perceptions of the distance learning experience, and the interactions between the two. A grounded theory process was used to collect, organize, and analyze the data.

In this chapter, I first discuss the findings and the tentative grounded theory that emerged from the results of this research. This theory is not to be interpreted as definitive in any way, but as a theoretical insight into the way rural communities and distance education experience may be related. The chapter concludes with implications for practice and recommendations for administrators, designers and supporters of distance education in rural communities.

In this first section, I discuss the findings in terms of the interplay between the rural community and the distance learning experience and my own reflections on research and learning.

Adult Learning in Rural Communities and Communities of Practice

Each interview in this study began with an exploration of the concept of community. All participants agreed that Dunbar’s (1996) definition of a
community (as a group of people with whom one has a truly social relationship) seemed reasonable. All found it an easy task to identify a primary community based on the 150 to 200 people with whom they communicate on a regular basis. All participants viewed themselves as part of a home community, situated geographically in a non-metropolitan area. From these 11 interviews, a consistent, detailed view of the primary community emerged.

The resource-based history of participants' home communities influenced the role of education within that community culture. In this culture, education is regarded as primarily an activity for children and youth and not something that one would willingly seek in adulthood. As Eller et. al (1998) note, rural citizens often view postsecondary education as an alien idea. Consequently, continuing education in adulthood is a concept largely outside the community culture. These conclusions also support the research completed by D. L. Brown (1987), who suggests that both cultural influences and economic restraints may contribute to reduced support for formal education in rural communities.

Participants' transcripts suggested that although community members may not value the learning that accompanies advanced education, they do appreciate the value of the credential that results. This apparent paradox may be related to the influence of the working class, resource-based community culture prevalent in these rural communities. Sennett and Cobb (1972) noted a similar phenomenon while investigating the increasing credential requirements for blue-collar jobs in spite of little net change in real skill requirements for the work. They
suggested that such prerequisite academic backgrounds served to maintain class distinctions in American society. Although no participants in my study specifically mentioned that they pursued further education in order to move into another social class, several suggested that their educational involvement conferred some social capital. Perhaps Sennett and Cobb’s analysis does not apply so neatly here because the requirement for the credential usually comes from outside these communities (e.g., as a result of provincial standardization).

It is interesting to note that although participants consistently described a community culture that did not support continuing education in adulthood, almost all of them identified significant learning achievements that they had undertaken during their own adulthood. The learning experiences they related correspond to Tough’s (1979) learning projects or to Brookfield’s (1984) first two types of community adult education processes: adult education for the community and adult education in the community. Considering the variety of backgrounds represented by these participants, it seems reasonable to assume that almost all rural residents participate in some learning activities, but that they may not think of such activities as contributing to the educational culture of the community – perhaps because they primarily associate education with institutionally based delivery.

Participants in this study also viewed themselves as belonging to a number of communities of practice. In accordance with Wenger’s (1998) updated definition, each participant described smaller sub-communities with whom they
interacted at home, at work, at church, or in sports activities. An important feature of the rural lifestyle was that these communities of practice often overlapped considerably for each participant. This feature, which affected participants’ sense of anonymity, sometimes influenced their participation in educational activities as well.

The time spent discussing participants’ perceptions about their primary community and communities of practice was especially valuable, as participants’ strong sense of home and their reflections about their community culture helped me to understand both their decision to select a distance programme, and their sense of isolation in the community while taking it. After reflecting on my findings, the fate of the Nova Scotian island fishers, described in Chapter 1, seems almost inevitable. Remaining in a community while pursuing education that “comes from away” is isolating enough. Being removed from the community for an extended period of time, and then attempting not only to reintegrate oneself into community life but also to make sense of one’s outside education within the rural community context, could be an almost impossible task.

**Distance Learning Experience**

Among the participants in this study, the desire to move into a new community of practice or to achieve greater responsibility or stability in an existing one was generally the first reason given for beginning a formal programme of study. However, the nature of the rural community itself also
contributed to programming decisions. Participants agreed that rural communities in this part of the country seem bewildered by the economic transformations of this past decade. Resource-based economies are shifting, and residents feel increasing pressure to expand employment options, seek additional training, and earn a more secure credential. Yet established adults are unable (or unwilling) to leave the community, and programmes delivered at a distance are usually the only option. As MacBrayne (1995) also noted, limited choices in distance programming coax residents to enroll in programmes that may not be quite what they were looking for. Once enrolled, they usually have nobody around in the community to talk with about their learning experience. They may even feel actively discouraged from talking about it. Matheos et al. (2000) noted similar distance education experiences in a group of rural women; my research confirms these researchers’ observations and suggests that they may apply to male rural residents as well.

Community and Communication

Surprisingly, this lack of communicative space was true even for those participants who were employed in an educational institution within the community. One might expect that a community of practice that provides at least part of the impetus for further education would also provide both tangible and moral support for the distance learner; in fact, this was not always the case. Perhaps this is because most distance learning programmes are still so new and
members of the community of practice may be still personally unfamiliar with the programme and the experience. Similarly, Thorn (1995) notes that rural college staff may not routinely make a special effort to understand or connect with the local communities they serve.

All participants in this project mentioned the importance of communication to the success of their distance learning venture; in fact, the emotional intensity of their responses suggests a causal relationship between dialogue during the educational venture and their ultimate learning success. However, participants also mentioned the important role of structure in their distance learning programmes. It seems that structure aids success in distance learning insofar as it increases dialogue – for example, when learners were forced to communicate with the instructor because a critical assignment was due. Moore (1996) theorizes that the distance learning experience is improved by increasing dialogue and decreasing structure. Consequently, the results obtained in this study support the first aspect of the theory of transactional distance, but challenge the second.

Although all participants mentioned the importance of communication, only two expressed a strong sense of community with their on-line peers. Several participants mentioned that their on-line cohort groups or teams seemed well-structured and facilitated but, nonetheless, did not engender a genuine sense of community. As suggested by Lauzon’s (2000) research, these learners may, at times, have felt more actively engaged with the technology rather than
the overall learning experience. They missed the active peer-to-peer interaction, the immediacy of dialogue, and the added dimension of body language. They also indicated that the lack of these aspects contributed to an overall sense of isolation. Such observations conflict with the current emphasis in distance education literature on the importance of virtual communities among on-line learners (for example, see Rovai, 2002). It is possible that this discrepancy is at least partly due to the positioning of the researcher in these studies. In most of the virtual community research I examined, an on-line instructor already comfortable in the virtual environment queried his or her students about their sense of community in the on-line course. In contrast, the distance learners that I interviewed were being queried not from the context of the academic community but in their home community – and by a researcher (me) who did not have a vested interest in eliciting a positive answer about community. As R. E. Brown (2001) notes, even when the virtual environment is well-supported, not all on-line learners truly join the community; for example, almost half of the learners in Brown's study did not agree that a community had been formed in their on-line class.

Conflicts and Border Pedagogy

Academic and rural communities conflicted in a number of ways. Lauzon (2000) claims that distance learners are more likely to be successful if their values are closely aligned with the academic community they seek to join.
Participants in my study did not obviously appear to be at risk if their values differed from the academic institution, but they did report a number of conflicts between their distance learning participation and their other communities of practice. The academic language they were required to use in their studies was not the language used in their community of practice; the type of academic work expected was usually not the type of work they saw in their community of practice. The rules and regulations of the academic institution were also usually unfamiliar. These observations support the conclusions of Matheos et al. (2000), who note that the distinctiveness of rural culture and the policies of formal educational institutions both contribute to a poor fit for distance education in rural communities. In addition, closely overlapping communities of practice affected the types of projects participants chose to do and perhaps how “open” they could be with assignments, as any project that necessitated the involvement of others often became public to the community.

Conflicts like the ones described above can also be framed in terms of a border pedagogy analysis. Each participant in this study belonged to a constellation of overlapping communities of practice, shaped by the rural context. The addition of an academic community to their lives reshaped the constellation somewhat and created a number of new overlaps with existing communities of practice. The fit was not always a comfortable one: participants’ comments frequently revealed a sense of friction or conflict where communities or cultures intersected. For example, a number of participants related episodes of alienation
or even disapproval from colleagues and friends who had no first-hand experience of academic community involvement. Such conflicts acknowledge the “shifting borders that both undermine and reterritorialize different configurations of culture, power and knowledge” (Giroux, 1991, p. 509); and participants’ struggles to resolve them can be viewed as border pedagogy.

**Issues not Unique to Rurality?**

Although it seems likely that rural community culture contributes to the sense of foreignness that pervades the distance learning experience, it is possible that distance learners in other community settings feel the same way. Non-distance learners may feel a similar sense of disconnectedness with the academic context of their studies. The results from this research project are all grounded in the experience of learners from resource-based non-metropolitan communities. Without conducting similar research with a group of urban learners – or rural residents in non-resource-based communities – it is impossible to conclude that a sense of foreignness in the distance learning experience is a property unique to rural, resource-based learner audiences. Nevertheless, I note that this sense of foreignness was a strong point of commonality among the rural distance learners who participated in this research project.

Technological barriers – although not unique to rural learners – challenged participants as they attempted to work with the academic community providing the programme. Most participants needed to rely heavily on
sometimes-complex technology to communicate with the distance learning institution, instructor, and fellow learners. One participant, in particular, mentioned that developing the requisite technological skills was the most difficult aspect of her distance venture. However, unlike a number of researchers in the literature (for example, see Care & Udod, 2000; and Lauzon, 2000), participants in this study did not feel threatened, excluded, or alienated by the technology itself. Most participants were already using a variety of communication technologies in their home and work activities and considered the educational applications to be a natural extension of this use. In this way, participants’ attitudes generally support Haughey’s (1990) suggestion that new technologies are often automatically adapted to both educational and non-educational applications.

**Impacts and Outcomes of the Distance Learning Experience**
Most participants in this study noted that their distance learning experience did not have the impact they had expected. On the one hand, the impact on the participant’s professional life was often less than expected; on the other hand, the impact on personal life was usually more than expected. Some participants had anticipated an impact on their community; however, this impact was not as obvious as they had hoped. Selman and Dampier (1991) note that effective community development depends upon broad-based community input; considering this requirement, the results I observed in this study do not seem surprising.

Regardless of programme impact, most participants in this study felt that their distance learning venture was an enabling experience and were grateful that they were able to advance their education while remaining in their primary community. Like Haughey (1990), participants noted the value of retaining employment and building human capital in the rural area. However, distance education is viewed in these rural communities as an outside force; something that “comes from away,” and as such does not contribute to the overall development of the community in an organized way. Such an attitude suggests that an extension education model in which the educational promoter lives in the community, understands community issues, and applies new programmes and new technologies to community betterment may be more effective for situating distance educational delivery in the community. Several researchers suggest a growing role for communications technology in extension education (e.g., see
DeYoung, Harris & Larsen, 1995, and King & Boehlje, 2000); unfortunately, none of the literature I encountered in either extension education or distance learning currently promotes a more direct integration of the two practices.

The most unexpected result from this research was that I did not find what I anticipated. My original hypothesis was that participants would identify the heavy commitment of time as the most difficult aspect of the distance learning experience, and that meeting this time requirement would be the main factor in their decision to remain in the programme or to drop out. I had suspected that distance learners would resent this degree of involvement with the academic community, an involvement that might compromise other aspects of their lives. In fact, this was not quite the case. Participants did find the investment of time to be difficult at times, and they especially resented assignments that seemed superfluous or irrelevant. However, most participants did not report a substantial conflict between the time commitment of the distance learning project and the rest of their community life. For the most part, community commitments continued to come first and the learning commitment was squeezed in where it would fit.

**Personal Reflection**

This study has provided me with the opportunity to explore theoretical aspects of adult education, community learning, and distance education; and to apply this learning in a comprehensive research project. After conducting and
reflecting on the project, I can identify a number of ways in which my understanding and my practice have been affected. In this section, I discuss what I have learned from interviewing, from the process of research, and from the experience of being a distance learner myself.

**Reflections on Interviewing**

To conduct my research project, I used interviews to gather my data and a grounded theory process to analyze the results. I learned a great deal from the interviews I conducted with the eleven participants in this study. In most cases, the interview questions I posed worked well to elicit rich discussion about distance learning experience while providing some degree of focus to the session. For some participants, however, the questions seemed to provide a springboard to monologue about a much wider variety of strongly felt issues; it was challenging, at times, to keep the discussion on topic without almost “putting words in their mouths.” I found it difficult to reconcile my need to maintain focus in the interview, with my preconceived notion that good interviewing necessitates a degree of detachment in the interviewer so as not to “bias” the interviewees. I learned, however, that it is impossible to be detached or objective while interviewing, because good interviewing necessitates establishing a relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

Conducting interviews in a small community presented a number of challenges. It was difficult to locate a wide variety of participant experiences and,
at first, I worried that I would not be able to find enough participants with any
type of distance learning experience. A few participants expressed concern
about the anonymity of their interviews – a very real concern where communities
of practice overlap extensively and even a few personal details is sufficient to
single out an individual member.

Overlapping communities of practice also affected how I conducted the
research and selected participants. Based on a desire to preserve the anonymity
of participants and to minimize the effect of my position in the community (a
faculty member, an employee of the college) on any perceived sense of power in
the interviews, I sought participants whom I didn’t know or wasn’t connected to in
some way. Such individuals, however, were very hard to find – only three
participants in this study were relative strangers to me. On the one hand, I
recognize that this is one of the realities of attempting to conduct research in
one’s own rural area. On the other hand, it would not have been possible to
parachute in a total stranger who could have magically located a completely
unrelated collection of participants and then unearthed unbiased, “pure” answers
in the interviews. It is only because I am a connected member of my community
that I was able to arrange these interviews in the first place. I was completely
unable to enlist interviewees in Jaffray, for example (one of the small
communities in which I had placed posters inviting participants) – a result I
attribute to my lack of connections in that community.
From my experience, I learned that conducting unbiased, power-free qualitative research in a small community is neither possible nor an ideal to strive towards. This study illustrates for me how important it is that the researcher make a rigorous attempt to identify her role in the community, and to situate herself explicitly as the interpreter of the data.

**Reflections on the Research Process**

My confidence in the grounded theory research process was tentative at first. As Merriam and Simpson (2000) and Babchuk (1997) warn, the grounded theory approach runs the risk of being either too rigid or too laissez faire, resulting in a significant distortion of meanings if the researcher errs at either extreme. Nevertheless, this approach provided me with the flexibility to explore a frontier problem, a structure with which to analyze the results, and an inductive process for drawing conclusions. The process provided enough rigour and liberty that I was able to reach a conclusion distinctly different from the one I had anticipated and was consequently an effective mechanism for exploring this particular research problem. As Merriam and Simpson point out: “grounded theory is particularly suited to investigating problems for which little theory has been developed” (p. 112); certainly an investigation of the relationship between the community and the distance education experience meets this criterion.

Although the rigorous method of constant comparison employed in this process did reveal a consistent thread throughout my interview transcripts, I
became more aware of the ambiguity inherent in any research process. Now, when I read the research of others, I am more likely to consider the context and question the results. I understand that, like learning itself, all research is situated in time and place and affected by circumstances. It is not so much a matter of taking it all with a grain of salt, but of recognizing that salt gets into everything – even quantitative research. This essential allowance for the possibility of inaccuracy and misinterpretation is no doubt one of the reasons why ethics in research is so important.

**Reflections on Being a Distance Learner**

I have learned other, less tangible lessons about distance education from my own experience as a distance student. When I review my learning journal, I can identify a number of instances when I felt isolated and longed for a peer group, like a stranger in a strange land. However, I learned that my experience had many similarities with the participants I interviewed. Like other distance learners, I decided to begin an educational programme largely so that I might acquire a position of more power within my community of practice. Like them, too, I had strong, immovable ties to the community and a distance programme was my only option. I have experienced first-hand the sense of prestige that comes from being an exotic: a master’s degree student, doing research, in a small community where a significant proportion of the adult population has not finished high school (D. L. Brown, 1987). Such first-hand experience offers me
the potential to relate to other rural residents in distance education in a more authentic way.

My distance education experience affects my life in deeper, more personal ways as well. In spite of the challenges I have encountered in this learning journey, I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to further my education while maintaining my employment, family ties, and community connections. I feel a sense of regret that the island community described in Chapter 1 did not survive long enough to enjoy the same rich (and growing) options for continuing education that my current community can access.

Summary and Conclusions

In this project, I sought to explore the relationship between rural learners’ primary communities and their distance learning experiences. In total, the experience of 11 distance learners contributed to this research, and although this constitutes a very small and diverse sample, some commonalities were represented in all of the interviews. It seems reasonable to suggest that learners’ primary communities influence the distance learning experience in three main ways: (a) in the impetus for undertaking a formal learning programme by distance; (b) in the learning venture itself while underway; and (c) in the impact on the learner’s career and other aspects of life. In effect, the community mediates the distance learning experience at these three stages in the learners’ journeys.
The participants in this study undertook a formal learning programme primarily in order to improve their position within their community of practice. These non-metropolitan learners chose a distance programme because they felt strongly that they had no other educational alternative: leaving their community (and often their source of employment) was not a realistic option. Because there are fewer programmes available by distance than in a more traditional, residential format, many of these learners elected to enroll in educational programmes that were not quite what they were looking for.

The experience of the distance learning venture was coloured by a pervasive sense of foreignness. Learners discovered that their experience was outside the usual community discourse. Communicating with the distance learning institution was at times awkward, and institutional rules and regulations were often seen as confusing, excessive, and sometimes unreasonable. The participants in this study seldom felt themselves to be a part of the academic community. Although the distance programmes surveyed utilized a variety of communication technologies, learners often felt alone in their learning venture and frustrated by the lack of face-to-face communication. However, most of the learners relied heavily on these technologies and processes and were further frustrated when the technology failed or the instructor did not make adequate use of it. Although the learning material may have been interesting, coursework requirements often seemed vague and contradictory. The language of the academic community was seen as especially foreign, and the requirement to use
this language was sometimes felt to be an imposition. Nevertheless, being an active student while continuing to participate in a community of practice resulted in a certain degree of prestige; the role of the student was regarded as somewhat exotic by others.

Dealing with the huge time commitment required of the distance programme was another significant aspect of the experience. In some cases, the extent of the time commitment had a profound effect on the other communities of practice within the learner’s life. However, this effect was not – as I had anticipated – perceived as the most significant aspect.

Heaney (1995), in his discussion of legitimate peripheral participation and of the marginality that learners may experience when trying to gain entrance into a community of practice, provides a unique lens through which the summary of this study can be viewed. In my research, all participants were seeking to enter a new community of practice or to move substantially within the community of practice related to their current vocation. They had spent varying lengths of time working at sometimes-contested areas of the periphery, hoping to either get in or to substantially move ahead towards a position of more empowerment in the community of practice. All participants undertook an educational programme because they believed that the credential earned would provide that ticket across the border.

The purpose of the distance learning experience (including the roles of the institution, the curriculum, and the instructor) should have been to provide
that essential support – that border pedagogy – during the difficult journey over the border. However, the educational support that participants received was lacking in a number of ways. In some cases, no border crossing (i.e. no programme in distance delivery format) was available to rural learners into the preferred community of practice. For several participants, the border zone was defended by complex academic requirements that added barriers rather than facilitative processes. The most serious deficit occurred when the training provided by the distance programme conflicted with, rather than supported, legitimate peripheral participation: participants found themselves preparing for a community of practice that did not even exist in their non-metropolitan context. As Lauzon (2000) laments, these distance learners were required “to adhere to a story that is not their story, to subscribe to a knowledge that is not their knowledge” (p. 65). In this worst-case scenario, participants found themselves either abandoning their educational gains or contemplating a move to the city in order to practice.

From my findings, I offer other, more tentative conclusions. When competing demands pull rurally situated distance learners between academic and primary communities, they generally choose to stay with their primary community. It seems that Dunbar (1996) was right: the group of people with whom we communicate on a regular basis constitute a “genuinely social relationship” (Chap. 4, para. 16) and earn our primary allegiance. When education is situated outside the primary community (as it was for the islanders
described in Chapter 1), social connection with the primary community is eroded by prolonged immersion in the academic community. For rural community sustainability, distance education offers an important developmental tool.

**Implications**

In this section, I address the larger purpose of this study: the problem of how to design distance education so that it better fits within learners’ existing community lives. The results of this research have a number of implications for practice (both for myself and for other distance education practitioners), and lead to recommendations for improved distance program design, delivery and support.
In my position of e-Learning Specialist, I am responsible for designing and selecting curriculum for distance courses. I also provide input into policy decisions for distance learning programmes, and I consult extensively with those who provide direct support to distance learners. There are a number of ways that I can reduce the sense of foreignness that distance learners feel. As a result of this research, I am more aware of the communities of learners in the college’s catchment area and about how education fits into that community structure. I have learned about the various learning communities that these people have belonged to, and the effects (both positive and negative) that these communities have on other aspects of their lives. I am in a better position to design distance programmes that support, rather than threaten, the communities of our learners.

I also liaise with external groups from smaller rural communities (e.g., Columbia Lake Band) and so have a peripheral role in integrating distance education with community development and sustainability. This research project will inform my work with external clients, enabling me to actively listen for those clues to community context that are essential to distance education success. For example, when working with client organizations, I can listen for clues about the existing learning culture within the community so that I can advise delivery strategies accordingly. When counselling new distance learners I can help each learner recognize potential barriers (for example, the need to write in academic English) and identify possible community supports for learning (for example, writing tutors and librarians with whom I connect as a result of my work) before
problems become overwhelming. As I better understand that my work is situated in the periphery – in the frictional zone where rural culture and distance education overlap – I can contribute to the border pedagogy there and frame my effort to “enhance the agency of learners” (Heaney, 1995, Section 4, para. 5).

This research also has the potential to contribute to the practice of adult distance educators beyond my workplace. Distance education still lacks a broad theoretical foundation (Moore & Kearsley, 1996) and much of the current research is directed towards technological applications or an improved academic environment for the distance learner. Educators who appreciate the complex community structures of their distance learners can do more than design distance programmes that create a strong on-line academic community; they can plan distance delivery strategies that support a balance between academic and other community life. Programmes more appropriate to the needs of distance learners may reduce attrition rates and help to translate the promise of new educational technologies into genuine, increased access to continuing adult education.

Recommendations

Based on my research findings and interpretation, I offer the following recommendations. These recommendations are provided for three groups: administrators of distance learning programmes, those who design or select curriculum for distance courses, and those who provide direct support to
distance learners. The main focus of these recommendations is to reduce the sense of foreignness that many distance learners experience.

**For Administrators of Distance Learning Programmes**

1. Become more familiar with the home communities of your distance learners. Use focus groups and surveys to determine the educational needs of distant learners and their communities.

2. If budget allows, create a position in the distance education department responsible for community liaison. Ensure that familiarity with the distance learner audience and their community context is included in the hiring criteria.

3. Investigate administrative procedures related to distance learning (registration, exam invigilation, payment schedules, etc.) from the distance learner’s perspective to ensure that the processes are simple, clear, as streamlined as possible, and supported by friendly staff.

4. Provide training (including technical training, where appropriate) and support for faculty and staff who must work directly with distance learners.

**For Those Who Design or Select Curriculum for Distance Courses**
1. Find out all you can about the learner audience for the distance-delivered curriculum. Learn about learners’ communities of practice and how new learning may be applied. As much as possible, select curriculum resources (texts, projects, case studies, etc.) appropriate to learners’ communities of practice.

2. Reconsider your requirements for academic language in reading and writing assignments. Insist on a sophisticated level of academic language only when course transfer is an issue or the language is likely to be applied in the learner’s community situation. Whenever possible, design assessment strategies that provide learners with other options for demonstrating their learning.

For Those Who Provide Direct Support to Distance Learners

1. Provide and maintain a structure in course scheduling, but be prepared to provide some flexibility in terms of assignment due dates, midterm exams, and so forth.

2. Contact is key for distance learners. Communicate regularly and often.
   Respond as quickly as possible to submitted work; be sure to communicate unavoidable delays.

3. Good use of communications technology increases contact. Through training and practice, ensure that your use of email attachments, on-line delivery
software, discussion boards, and so forth becomes transparent – your learners should not have to bear the consequences of your struggle to manage the technology that has been specified for your distance course.

This study offers adult educators a perspective on community that may be beyond the usual ways they think about the role of community in their work. It has also enhanced my ability to understand and respond to the unique learning needs of distance students in our college’s rural catchment area. Rural communities throughout Canada are bewildered by the impact of the information age and rapid economic change, and are struggling to adapt without sacrificing all that is special about a rural lifestyle. Less fickle than raw lumber and more resilient than mineral ore, rural residents are the resource most likely to survive and support this community life through tough transitional times. To do this well, they must be enabled to stay in the community while they develop new skills for the 21st century. The work described in this thesis is important because it contributes to that vision. However, this study was exploratory only and as such should be followed by the development of a strong, clear model to describe how distance learning works in rural communities, and by substantial research into the effective application of new technologies and delivery strategies for rural learners.
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APPENDIX A

Revised Interview Question List (March 3, 2002)

Please tell me a little about/describe your community.

What are the most serious problems facing your community today? What role could education play in addressing those problems?

How does your community support education?

Tell me about a successful educational or learning venture that you have undertaken as an adult. What made it successful?

Please tell me about your distance learning involvement.
   Why did you choose this particular course or program of studies?
   Why didn’t you choose a residential program? Why did you choose a distance program? Why this institution?
   What was/is the hardest part about taking a course by distance?
   What aspects of your distance education experience were most surprising? Most frustrating? Most rewarding?

Please tell me about your relationship with your instructor and your fellow distance learners. In what way(s) do these people support you?

What’s your distance learning community like? How is it different from your “main” community?

Please tell me about your relationship with the distance education institution. What details (schedule, synchronicity, price, openness of admissions policy) support you? What conditions (if any) have been hardest to meet?

Is/was there anything about your distance education experience that seemed strange?

How do you see this distance learning opportunity changing your life? Your community?

How does this distance learning involvement affect your relationship with your community?
How do you think this distance education experience could be altered to make it better fit your situation? How could it be altered to make it more attractive or possible for other members of your community?