The Roller Coaster Life of the Online Learner: How Distance Educators Can Help Students Cope

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* *The author would like to express her appreciation to the Canadian Association of University Continuing Education for the financial support it has given to this research project.*

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study of how one small group of graduate students coped with the stresses of learning at a distance over the course of the three to five years in which they were enrolled in their program of study. The study used a model of transition to examine how their coping responses changed as they moved into, through, and out of their program. It also assessed the students' perceptions of the "adult student friendliness" of the educational institution offering the program. The findings portrayed a "roller coaster ride" for these online students, whose somewhat limited initial coping strategies eventually became more adaptive. The findings suggested that adult educators

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit une étude sur la manière dont un petit groupe d'étudiants diplômés a supporté les tensions causées par l'apprentissage à distance au cours des trois à cinq années pendant lesquelles ils étaient inscrits dans un programme d'études. Cette étude s'est servie d'un modèle de transition pour examiner la façon dont leurs réactions d'adaptation ont changé au début de leur programme, en cours de programme et en fin de programme. Cette étude a aussi évalué les perceptions des étudiants du "caractère accueillant des étudiants adultes" de l'établissement d'enseignement offrant le programme. Les résultats décrivent des véritables hauts et bas pour ces étudiants

Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education
Vol. 27, No. 2, Fall 2001
pp. 33-59

who teach in online programs might benefit from looking to the field of transition counselling for help in addressing their students' coping needs, as well as to the attributes of online communication as a way of maximizing support services for these students.

en ligne, dont les stratégies initiales d'adaptation quelque peu limitées se sont finalement améliorées. Ces résultats suggèrent que les professeurs adultes qui enseignent en ligne pourraient trouver avantage à examiner le domaine du counseling de transition pour les aider à répondre aux besoins d'adaptation de leurs étudiants, ainsi que les attributs de la communication en ligne comme moyen d'optimiser les services de soutien pour ces étudiants.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the experiences of one small group of working professionals as they entered, moved through, and successfully exited a primarily online graduate program in workplace learning. It examines the administrative and personal support needs of adult students enrolled in a primarily distance-delivered graduate program. Further, it proposes that these students' needs might be addressed by an integrated model of support services that capitalizes on the unique communications' capabilities of distance technology.

The author's primary intent in presenting this case study is to focus on the personal stresses of this mature group of adult learners (who represent an increasingly high proportion of students in our post-secondary systems) as they moved through this transition experience. A secondary intent is to suggest that models of counselling adults in transition may have a great deal to offer distance educators who generally have similar theoretical assumptions and complementary practices (Bloom & Walz, 2000). Indeed, recent "best practices" on facilitating online learning point to a potentially useful partnership between these two fields.

RELATED LITERATURE

Much has been written about the need for more and better support for distance students in general (Brigham, 2001; Burge, 1994; Gibson, 2000; Kasworm & Londoner, 2000; Peters, 2000). Canadian governments at the federal (Human Resources Development Canada, 2001) and provincial (Advisory Committee for Online Learning, 2001) levels have recognized the possible relationship between effective student support services and participation rates of some groups of adult learners. Recently, the Advisory Committee for Online Learning (2001) recommended that "post secondary institutions should provide a full range of technical and other supports to learners to ensure that they can take full advantage of online learning opportunities" (p. 76).

In Canada, well-articulated models for providing support services to students enrolled in distance learning programs are just beginning to appear (see Potter, 1998; Sweet, 1993). These models, which are best described as dissemination approaches, are concerned with the effective distribution of information on how to deal with academic (e.g., study and writing skills) and non-academic (e.g., stress) issues by a guidance centre located on a central campus. Potter (1998), in a study of the support service needs of distance learners at three Canadian bi-model universities, recommended the provision of personal and academic/learning assistance throughout the students' tenure in their programs—beginning with pre-enrolment and ending with career development exit counselling. Potter's model clearly advocates a movement away from simple dissemination of information towards more comprehensive developmental student support services. Keierleber and Hansen (1992) described an ecological approach (based on Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1991) to providing services; it involves coordinating assistance to students in career development, personal counselling, and the various administrative tasks associated with being an adult student in a university setting. Other countries that are experienced in delivering learning programs at a distance have moved from dissemination to developmental, or even to ecological approaches. They have done so in order to integrate the provision of academic and non-academic services in a less-centralized fashion that is consistent with the increasingly interactive nature of computer-mediated teaching and learning (Sweet, 1993).

Drawing from other countries' experiences, Sweet (1993) described a developmental approach to services for distance students that actively promotes not only their intellectual development and well-being—by bringing together the traditionally distinct academic advising and tutoring tasks—but also interaction amongst and between students and instructors—by using either mediated or face-to-face means (p. 1). Focusing on the delivery of adult career transition services, Wiesenberg (1996) argued that the use of computer-mediated conferencing in adult education holds much promise for improving the accessibility and quality of the learning experience, in general, and career development services, in particular.

The picture that is emerging from distance education literature on best practices for online facilitation emphasizes the need for teachers to become "guides on the side," that is, to act as learning resources to students who work autonomously online as self-motivated managers of their own learning. Teachers who are most effective in this new learning environment are proficient in a number of roles, all of which differ from the "sage on the stage" role that has dominated face-to-face teaching for so long. For example, Berge (1995; 1998) and others (Cranton, 2000; Higgison, 2000; Knowlton, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Salmon, 2000) described a "social moderating" or "counsellor-facilitator" role that establishes a sense of solidarity or a "learning community" amongst students to keep them motivated and actively participating online. Teachers who successfully take on this role have mastered the use of group dynamics to create collaborative learning classrooms that more clearly reflect the learning goals and styles of adult learners (Brookfield, 1986). In addition, they have recognized the potential impact that trusting and supportive relationships may have on promoting transformative learning (Wiessner & Mezirow, 2000).

Most adult students studying at a distance have multiple role demands, typically lack recent experience in the student role, and, subsequently, face numerous coping issues (Cross, 1981; Schlossberg et al., 1991). The transition into, through, and out of their role as student can represent major challenges for them, challenges that require complex coping responses in order to successfully navigate them (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Not all adult students are prepared for these challenges (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996).

Cross (1981) identified three general categories of barriers facing adult students:

- situational (such as lack of money, time, or emotional support);
- dispositional (such as lack of self-confidence or confidence in the institution's willingness to respond to their needs); and
- institutional (such as the unavailability of evening or weekend classes or anti-adult student biases on the part of faculty and staff).

Focusing on the third barrier, Schlossberg et al. (1991) and others (see, for example, Keierleber & Hansen, 1992) asserted that the rigid and hierarchical nature of traditional post-secondary educational institutions serves neither the academic nor the personal needs of adult learners. They argued that adults returning to learning often struggle with role (i.e., overload, change, and identity), support system (family, friends, and community), and transition (i.e., moving into, through and out of) issues, and that these issues are best addressed by a more person-centred model of student services than is typically present in traditional institution-centred educational settings. They also believed that educational institutions need to recognize that administrative policies and procedures that give messages about how "marginal" adult students are to the institution can hinder or enhance the learning environment for adult students. These students perceive that they are marginal based on whether: institutional policies and procedures are sensitive to their concerns; advisers and other information providers respond to their questions; the administration acknowledges competing demands on their time; and faculty members respect what they have to offer (Schlossberg, Lassalle, & Golec, 1989).

Current research on adults' transition coping strategies has been organized into three categories of coping responses: 1) taking action to change the situation through problem-solving; 2) changing the meaning of the situation through reappraisal; or 3) managing their reaction to the stress through positive action (Pearlin & Schooler,1978). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described a process model of coping that examines the dynamics of a person's thoughts and behaviours within a specific context; they defined coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 141). They acknowledged that this coping response is very complex and involves a myriad of factors, including:

- the timing of stressful events in relation to the person's life cycle (adults with several roles to fulfill experience more stress than youth with very few);
- their general control expectancies (those who believe that outcomes are dependent on their own behaviour use more problem-focused coping strategies); and
- their perceived social support (or subjective evaluation of the supportiveness of significant others).

Moreover, Lazurus and Folkman conceptualized coping strategies as either emotion-focused, that is, regulating emotional responses to a stressful situation that is generally appraised as beyond their personal control, or problem-focused, that is, managing or altering a stressful situation that is generally appraised as under their control.

Arthur and Hiebert's (1996) study of the coping strategies used by post-secondary students in a traditional residential program of study suggested that, over time, people may become both more selective and effective in their use of coping strategies. They found that as the academic year progressed, a number of coping patterns emerged. Students started out using familiar methods to deal with familiar stressors, and continued to use these methods, even if they proved ineffective, as unfamiliar stressors emerged. The most frequently utilized coping strategy was positive reinterpretation and growth; however, female students tended to use more emotion-focused coping and male students more problem-focused coping. Older students tended to reduce the number of competing demands on their time in order to deal more effectively with the demands of student life. The researchers concluded that students of all ages would benefit from a broad range of transition coping strategies. Other studies have supported the provision of structured resources (such as study groups for first-year undergraduates—see Willment, 1999) to help students deal with the social, academic, and personal challenges of the transition into on-campus and online university life.

Schlossberg et al. (1995) offered a model of counselling adults in transition. The model's framework, which addresses the support needs of adult students, is grounded in adult learning and development and in counselling theory. Its theoretical foundation suggests some strategies that distance educators might use to assist their online learners with the stress of adding the role of student to an already full repertoire of busy life roles. The model has three major parts: approaching the transition; taking stock of one's resources to deal with the currently faced transition; and taking charge of the transition. Taking charge of the transition entails students systematically strengthening their resources in four areas:

- their life situation (trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience, concurrent stress, assessment);
- self (personal and demographic characteristics, psychological resources);
- support system (partner, close family and friends, relatives, co-workers, professionals); and
- coping strategies (modify the situation, control the meaning of the problem, manage the stress).

The process of moving into, through, and out of a formal program of study represents a strain that requires not only a variety of transition coping skills but also the ability to use them in a flexible/appropriate manner. Yet the coping responses required by adult students studying at a distance have typically not been addressed by educational institutions offering such programs. Faculty who teach this student group are often oblivious to the life strains and academic needs of this rapidly growing student group (Keierleber & Hansen, 1992). Identifying how these students successfully use coping strategies to complete a graduate program could help faculty teaching in these programs, as well as adult educators and program developers, to design more student-centred programs that include built-in support services to address these issues. If for no other reason than to reduce the stress and dropout rate of these students (Alterkruse & Brew, 2000), institutions need to help them navigate the ups and downs of being a student, let alone a distance student. As well, administrators of these programs need to be aware of how a student-friendly academic environment can enhance these students' ability to successfully complete their programs of study (Keierleber & Hansen, 1992; Schlossberg et al., 1991).

The purposes of the study described in this article were to clarify the specific coping responses that students used to successfully enter, move through, and complete a primarily distance-delivered graduate program and to record their perceptions of the student friendliness of their educational environment. The end goals of the study were to increase distance educators' understanding of the support needs of this population of learners—who are often the neediest but least supported students in our educational system—and to suggest possible ways of addressing this important issue.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Two cohorts of graduate students enrolled in the Master of Continuing Education (MCE) program in the Faculty of Continuing Education at the University of Calgary, Alberta, were recruited for this study. Eight of the 12 half courses in the MCE program are delivered by computer-mediated communication (CMC); the remaining 4 are delivered in an intensive, three-week-long, face-to-face spring/summer institute format. Students, who are from across Canada, begin their studies with the first of the two institutes, and then continue courses by CMC during the fall and winter semesters. In addition, each student must complete an individually supervised project, through a combination of CMC, telephone, and/or face-to-face meetings with the supervising faculty member. The final oral examination is conducted by audio-conference, unless the student wishes to travel to the University of Calgary campus for this event. Typically, students complete the program in three to five years, taking a minimum of four half courses per year.

In the spring of 1995 and 1996, entering MCE students were approached by the author/researcher during the beginning of their first face-to-face institute, given a brief description of the study, and invited to participate in it. Those who agreed to participate were then asked to complete and return two measures to the researcher prior to the end of the institute: the Transition Coping Questionnaire (TCQ)(Personnel Decisions Inc., 1993) and the Mattering Scale for Adult Students in Higher Education (MHE) (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Students who completed and returned this first set of measures were then approached at the beginning of the second face-to-face institute one year later and asked to complete and return an identical second set of measures. Those who did so were approached again after they graduated—between one and three years later—and asked to complete and return a third identical set of measures.

Demographic data were also collected at these same three points in time. This would allow further exploration of any relationships that might appear between any of the dependent variables and those aspects of the participants' life circumstances that might be expected to influence their coping responses, that is, marital status, presence of dependents in the home, distance from the home institution, and employment status.

Thus, the study group consisted of 15 students (12 female and 3 male) who completed all three sets of measures over the course of the five-year study. The proportion of female to male students in this study (80% to 20%) was typical of the MCE program overall. Ranging in age from mid-20s to mid-40s, 11 (73%) of the participants were married/co-habiting and 4 (26%) were single. All were employed either full time (9, or 60%) or part time (6, or 40%) throughout the duration of the study.

Using a matched-pair design (Mendenhall & Ramey, 1973), students' t-tests were calculated on the differences in their mean responses to each item on the first, second, and third administration of the TCQ and the MHE. Pearson Product Moment correlations were calculated for all dependent (individual items and scales of both measures) and independent (demographic data) variables. All data analysis was conducted at the University of Calgary's Office of Institutional Analysis using SPSS Base 7.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc., 1996).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Moving Into the Program

> *I knew that a challenging full-time job, combined with family life including an active toddler and trying to do two graduate courses per term would be difficult, but I thought I could manage. In fact, I decided not to postpone the plan to increase the family, so with a new baby coming but maternity leave to look forward to, I still believed that graduating from the MCE program in two years was feasible for me. (a second-year student reflecting on how she felt upon entry into the program)*

The Transition Coping Questionnaire (TCQ)

Adults returning to a program of formal study, typically after an absence of several years, often have a very unrealistic idea of student life. Schlossberg et al. (1995) suggested that the ability of adult students to successfully deal with any major transition such as this depends upon their personal balance of assets and liabilities. It also requires personal adaptability in order to cope with the ups and downs that the transition will bring.

The study participants' entering TCQ responses (to the first administration of this measure) indicated that their most-used coping strategies at that point in time were: reading to gain guidance, inspiration, or distraction; using a range of strategies; and counting their blessings or comparing their situation to those less fortunate. The first two strategies focus on managing reactions to stress through positive action, whereas the third strategy changes the meaning of the situation through reappraisal. These initial TCQ responses also indicated participants' least-used coping strategies: participating in counselling, therapy, or support groups; using relaxation skills; and denying or delaying facing the facts for a short time. The first two strategies once again focus on managing reactions, while the third one changes the meaning of the situation.

As study participants moved from the beginning to the middle of the MCE program, they had significantly less emotional energy, as well as less emotional support from family members (second administration). At the same time, however, they experienced less disruption in their organizations/memberships and participated more effectively in counselling or support groups, as a coping strategy (see Table A1). At mid-point in their program, when participants' multiple-role demands were proving to be very energy consuming, the support they received from family members did not meet their expectations. Given that 80 percent of participants were female, and a majority of them partnered, the addition of a graduate student role may not have diminished any of their other role demands. In order to cope, participants turned to non-family sources of support. Moreover, as they moved into this transition process, their sense of their ability to deal with this situation, of who they were (Situation & Self Scale), and of the help they were receiving to cope (Situation & Support Scale; Self & Support Scale) appeared to be aligned (see Table A1). In other words, as they became more immersed in their new role of graduate student, their own personal and external resources became stronger. It also appeared that the degree of support they experienced was positively related to having dependents living at home with them (potentially another source of support) (Support Scale & Dependents), whereas their sense of identity was negatively related to being self-employed on a full-time basis (Self Scale & Self-Employment Full-Time). Perhaps both the personal and professional isolation of self-employment were more acutely experienced at this time of additional personal and professional stress.

Table A1: *The Transition Coping Questionnaire*

TCQ	Student t	Level of Significance p
#14	2.82	.01
#17a	2.47	.03
#19e	-2.51	.03
#42	-2.32	.04
	PPM Correlation r	**Level of Significance p**
Situation & Self	.74	.00
Situation & Support	.57	.03
Self & Support	.69	.01
Support Sc & Dependents	.57	.03
Self & Self-Employ FT	-.53	.04

The Mattering Scale for Adult Students in Higher Education (MHE)

According to the MHE, as study participants began their program they were unsure of how to relate to their professors. Specifically, they were unsure of how to interpret professors' comments, how to deal with being the same age as them, and, perhaps, how to cope with their expectations of being treated as equals by them. At the same time as they were starting to feel reasonably comfortable on campus, they were concerned about the university's ability to acknowledge competing demands on their time.

As participants moved from the beginning to the middle of the program, their MHE responses indicated that they felt that:

- they would have a harder time finishing it;
- they were receiving more support from classmates;
- classmates were reacting less positively to their experience and knowledge;
- they "fit" into their classes more;
- fellow students were listening to them more when they shared life experiences;
- their advisers were more responsive to their needs (Advising Scale); and
- the campus was acknowledging competing demands on their time better (Multiple Roles Scale) (see Table A2).

Thus, it appeared that the students felt that their advisers and the administration generally seemed to be more understanding of the multiple demands on their time. The seemingly contradictory feelings about classmates could have indicated that as classmates learned to trust and respect one another more, they also engaged in more open and more critically reflective dialogue, which could be experienced as less-positive responses from classmates (Wiesenberg, 1996).

The MHE responses also indicated that, as they entered the program, participants' perceptions of the extent to which both campus policies/procedures and advisers were sensitive to their concerns (especially acknowledging competing demands on their time) seemed to be positively related (Administration & Advising Scales; Administration & Multiple Roles Scales) (see Table A2). In contrast, marital status appeared to be negatively related to the sensitivity of the administration and advisers (Administration Scale & Marital Status; Advising Scale & Marital Status), as did having multiple roles to fulfill (Advising & Multiple Roles Scales; Multiple Roles Scale & Marital Status). Since 73 percent of participants were partnered, having many roles to fulfill at home may have conflicted with their new and very time-consuming role as graduate student. The extent to which these students felt at home on campus and in the classroom was positively related (Peer Interaction & Faculty Interaction Scales), as were their perceptions of this and of being self-employed (Peer Interaction Scale & Self-Employment Full-Time; Faculty Interaction Scale & Self-Employment Full-Time). Having dependents at home on a consistent basis may have provided some participants with emotional and practical support. Being self-employed, which could be a valuable source of a sense of professional identity and competence, appeared to be an advantage when dealing with the demands of graduate school and the lower status of graduate students within the traditional academic hierarchy.

Table A2: *The Mattering Scale for Adults in Higher Education*

MHE	Student t	Level of Significance p
#3	-2.36	.03
#5	-3.5	.00
#15	3.08	.01
#19	-2.10	.05
#30	-3.16	.01
Advising	-3.85	.00
MRoles	-2.91	.01
	PPM Correlation r	**Level of Significance p**
Admin & Advising	.61	.03
Admin & MRoles	.75	.00
Admin & Marital Status	-.59	.04
Advising & MRoles	.69	.01
Advising & Marital Status	-.62	.02
Advising & Dependents	.68	.01
Peer Inter & Faculty Inter	.86	.00
Peer Inter & Self-Employ FT	.66	.01
MRoles & Marital Status	-.61	.03
Faculty Inter & Self-Employ FT	.70	.01

Finally, study participants' perceptions of how well they were handling this stage of the transition/program and how well advisers (Situation & Advising Scales) and the administration were attending to their concerns were positively related (Situation & Multiple Roles Scales). Participants' ability to cope with this stage (Supports & Multiple Roles Scales) and their assessment of the extent to which the administration acknowledged competing demands on their time (Supports & Advising Scales) were also positively related (see Table A3).

Table A3: *Transition Coping Questionnaire & Mattering Scales for Adults in HE*

TCQ & MHE Scales	PPM Correlation r	Level of Significance p
Situation & Advising	.65	.01
Situation & MRoles	.66	.01
Supports & Advising	.75	.00
Supports & MRoles	.66	.01

To summarize, these findings paint an overall picture of adults struggling to deal with the additional new role of graduate student and to understand the effects of this transition on their relationships and routines with family, friends, and communities. Sometimes, they experienced less support from family and friends than they had expected, as these people also struggled to adjust to changes in their relationship and routines. However, participants appeared to manage this additional stress by reading to gain guidance and by comparing their situation favourably with others in similar situations. At this point in time, they did not choose to participate in counselling in order to better understand and deal with these stresses.

Being in the Middle of the Program

> *During my first year in the program, I went from full-time employment to unemployment, to underemployment, to overemployment. I happened to take two courses at exactly the wrong time when my professional career heated up. Work and university studies became my complete focus. As a result, I neglected my family and my marriage. (second-year student reflecting on his first year in the program)*

The Transition Coping Questionnaire (TCQ)

The TCQ responses of the study participants at the second administration of this measure indicated that, at the midpoint in the program, the strategies they utilized most fully were: making positive comparisons, reading, and using a range of strategies. The first strategy changes the meaning of the situation; the second and third manage reactions to stress. Participants' lowest-rated strategies were: sitting tight to see what happens, denying, and participating in counselling. The first and third strategies manage reactions to stress; the second changes the meaning of the situation.

There were significant strong positive correlations between participants' Situation and Support Scales and between their Self and Strategies Scales on the TCQ. This could indicate an ongoing alignment of both their perception of the transition and the support they were receiving from others, their own personal resources, and the coping strategies they were using at this time (see Table B1). Significant negative correlations between the Situation Scale and Martial Status and between the Support Scale and Marital Status seemed to indicate that being married/partnered did not necessarily translate into having a support system at home. This may have been the result of conflicting home and school role demands, a possibility that is supported by some of the shifts in individual items that are discussed above. However, it may also have been a manifestation of marital stress experienced by couples engaged in pursuing different life dreams. Interestingly, there was no change in the marital status of the participants over the course of the five-year study, with 73 percent of them both starting out and remaining partnered.

Other results worth noting are: the significant very strong negative correlation between the Support Scale and Full-Time Employment; the strong positive correlation between the Support Scale and Self-Employment Full-Time; and the strong positive correlation between the Situation Scale and Self-Employment Part-Time. Perhaps being self-employed (as opposed to working for someone else) while being a graduate student allows for a more supportive environment, not to mention a more flexible time schedule.

Table B1: *Transition Coping Questionnaire*

TCQ	PPM Correlation r	Level of Significance p
Situation & Support	.71	.00
Situation & Marital Status	-.58	.03
Situation & Self-Employ PT	.64	.01
Self & Strategies	.75	.00
Support & Marital Status	-.53	.04
Support & FT Employ	-.80	.00
Support & Self-Employ FT	.61	.02

The Mattering Scale for Adult Students in Higher Education (MHE)

In terms of the MHE responses at midpoint, study participants perceived that, although they were getting more support from classmates and feeling more accepted by them, they were getting less attention from them when sharing life experiences. They also believed that they were getting less recognition as adult students from professors. Moreover, participants felt even less happy about the way in which the administration appeared to be arranging things for its benefit, not for the benefit of students, and only slightly less unhappy about the extent to which the university acknowledged competing demands on their time. In short, participants continued to experience an emotionally supportive but intellectually challenging learning community while feeling unhappy about having to conform to policies and procedures designed for on-campus (as opposed to online) students.

The correlations between MHE scales and demographic variables indicated that participants' perceptions of the extent to which university policies and procedures were sensitive to their concerns and how well accepted they felt by peers were positively related (Administration & Peer Interaction Scales). So, too, were their perceptions of the extent to which university policies and procedures were sensitive to their concerns and the extent to which the university acknowledged competing demands on their time (Administration & Multiple Role Scales) and the faculty accepted them in the classroom (Administration & Faculty Interaction Scales) (see Table B2). The students' perceptions of the extent to which advisers attended to their concerns also appeared to be positively related to how well the university acknowledged their competing demands (Advising & Multiple Role Scales), but negatively related to marital status (Advising Scale & Marital Status). How comfortable they felt on campus, how accepted they felt by classmates and faculty, and how acknowledged they felt by the administration were all positively inter-related (Peer Interaction & Multiple Role Scales; Peer Interaction & Faculty Interaction Scales). Interestingly, being partnered continued to be a negative factor, possibly because the role of student still does not provide for competing role demands.

Table B2: *Mattering Scale for Adult Students in Higher Education*

MHE	PPM Correlation r	Level of Significance p
Admin & Peer Inter	.55	.05
Admin & MRoles	.75	.00
Admin & Faculty Inter	.66	.01
Advising & MRoles	.81	.00
Advising & Marital Status	-.55	.05
Peer Inter & MRoles	.62	.02
Peer Inter & Faculty Inter	.61	.03

To summarize, at the midpoint of their program, students' coping profiles were virtually identical to their entry profiles. That is, they continued to focus on managing their reactions to stress and were no more inclined to seek outside help in the form of counselling or support groups. Although somewhat ambivalent about how they felt in the program and in the "classroom" by then, they appeared to experience a higher degree of frustration with policies and procedures that were not designed for off-campus students.

Moving Out of the Program

> *The MCE program has had a major positive impact on me. When I came to last year's spring institute I had every intention of staying in my job for several more years. However, no matter what I had intended or anticipated, I could not control the impact that this program, and especially my renewed learning, would have on my life. … if you had told me about this impact and life change last spring, I simply would not have believed you.* (MCE graduate reflecting on the effect of the program on his career/life)

The Transition Coping Questionnaire (TCQ)

Study participants' mean responses to the TCQ's Strategies Scale at the third administration of this measure indicated that their most frequently used strategies at the end of their program were: using a range of strategies, mobilizing their resources, and reading. The first and third strategies are managing responses; the second is a "taking action" response, and this was the first time that this kind of coping strategy became one of the most preferred. Participants' lowest-rated strategies were: participating in counselling, allowing themselves to have fun, and using relaxation skills. These are all managing strategies, and they comprised an overall "assets and liabilities" profile that was quite different from the one that participants exhibited either upon entering the program or at midpoint. Thus, the tendency of participants to manage the stresses associated with this transition seemed to have declined at the same time as they added an "action-oriented" strategy to their repertoire.

As the students moved from the middle to the end of their program, nine (18%) of their mean responses on the TCQ shifted significantly, indicating that they were experiencing the end stage of the transition quite differently. Specifically, they felt that:

- the transition was happening at a better time;
- it was causing less stress in other roles in their life;
- it was more desirable now;
- it was causing less disruption in their relationship with close family other than spouse/partner and friends;
- it was having less impact on their financial situation;
- they were more effective at using denial to cope; and
- they were more supported generally (Support Scale) (see Table C1).

Table C1: *Transition Coping Questionnaire*

TCQ	Student t	Level of Significance p
#2	-2.09	.05
#4	-3.52	.00
#5	-2.81	.01
#18b	-2.20	.05
#19b	-2.23	.04
#19d	-3.42	.00
#20	-2.23	.04
#33	-2.32	.04
Support Scale	-2.25	.04
TCQ Scale	**PPM Correlation r**	**Level of Significance**
Situation & Support	.73	.00
Self & Support	.66	.01
Self & Self-Employ FT	-.53	.04

There were significant strong positive correlations between the Situation and Support Scales and the Self and Support Scales, and very strong positive correlations between the Self and Strategies Scales. These correlations seemed to indicate that participants' feelings about one mirror their feelings about the other(s) (see Table C1). They had used managing coping strategies, primarily, and "changing the meaning" coping strategies, secondarily, on a consistent basis until the end of the program, at which point they adopted a "take action" strategy. This finding portrays a group of adult students who initially focused on managing the stresses inherent in being a graduate student as an adaptive way to deal with a situation over which they had little control.

The Mattering Scale for Adult Students in Higher Education (MHE)

Some non-significant shifts appeared in the MHE as participants began to move out of the program. At this point, participants seemed to feel that their adult student status might be getting in the way of their interactions with classmates and that their questions were putting faculty on the defensive, even though their experience-based comments were accepted by them most of the time. They perceived their classmates as being more accepting of them, and faculty and administrators as being more sensitive to them. In contrast, they felt that the university was not committing enough resources to off-campus courses and was continuing to set things up for its own convenience, while still not acknowledging competing demands on their time. In effect, this group of graduating students appeared to have somewhat contradictory perceptions of their degree of “fit” on campus. Although they saw some increases in the administration’s and the faculty’s sensitivity to their needs, they also believed that both still had a way to go before they (students) would feel truly accepted as adult students in that educational environment.

According to the significant shifts in MHE scores at the end of the program, participants felt that classmates reacted more positively to their experience and knowledge, that more help was available to them on campus when they had a question or problem, and that advisers were more attentive to their concerns (Advising Scale) (see Table C2).

Table C2: *Mattering Scale for Adult Students in Higher Education*

MHE	Student t	Level of Significance p
#15	-3.54	.00
#18	-2.26	.04
Advising	-2.26	.04
	PPM Correlation r	**Level of Significance p**
Admin & Marital Status	-.57	.03
Admin & Self-Employ FT	-.55	.04

MHE and demographic correlations indicated that participants’ perceptions of the extent to which university policies and procedures were sensitive to their concerns were negatively related to their marital status and to being self-employed full-time (Administration Scale & Marital Status; Administration Scale & Self-Employment Full-Time) (see Table C2). This was not surprising, given that most of these policies and procedures were created for a student body that is typically single and not employed.

Correlation Between the TCQ and the MHE

The significant positive relationship between the Support and Multiple Role Scales could indicate that participants’ perceptions of the supportiveness of family, friends, and communities were closely aligned with the multiple demands on their time. That is, as one increased, so did the other, and vice versa (see Table C3).

Table C3: *TCQ & MHE*

TCQ & MHE Scale	PPM Correlation r	Level of Significance p
Support & MRoles	.55	.04

To summarize, compared to their perceptions at the midpoint of the program, at the end of it, participants felt significantly more positive about the program's impact on their life generally, about the educational environment in which they were studying, about how supportive their classmates and advisers were in terms of responding to their contributions to the class, and about their overall concerns as adult students. Interestingly, at graduation, as their sense of control over their lives returned, they appeared to shift the nature of their coping responses towards taking more direct positive action.

Differences between the Beginning and the End of the Program

> *… learning is not just a psychological process that happens in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives, but is intimately related to that world and affected by it. (Jarvis cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999)*

The Transition Coping Questionnaire (TCQ)

From the initial stage of this transition (i.e., entry into the program) to the end stage (i.e., graduation), study participants underwent many significant shifts (22.5% of TCQ items) in how they experienced this process (see Table D1). According to the TCQ, by the end of the program participants felt that:

- their situation was more positive;
- the transition was causing less stress in the other roles of their life;
- they had less physical energy to respond to the transition;
- they were getting less adequate support from their family;
- they expected less disruption in their relationships with close family other than spouse, friends, and organizations/memberships;
- the transition was having less of an impact on their financial situation;
- they were more effective in rearranging priorities and using denial as coping strategies; and
- their support system was stronger (Support Scale).

It is clear that their experiences as students were not felt in "splendid isolation" from the world in which they lived.

Table D1: *Transition Coping Questionnaire*

TCQ	Student t	Level of Significance
#2	-3.15	.01
#4	-3.37	.01
#13	3.23	.01
#17a	2.26	.04
#19b	-3.76	.00
#19d	-3.12	.01
#19e	-5.29	.00
#20	-3.24	.01
#30	-2.82	.01
#33	-3.57	.00
Support Scale	-2.60	.02

The Mattering Scale for Adult Students in Higher Education (MHE)

There were also many significant shifts (22.2% of MHE items) in how participants perceived the degree of "student friendliness" in the educational environment. By the end of the program, participants felt that:

- their adviser remembered more of what they had discussed with them;
- they got more support from classmates;
- there were more people available on campus to help them with questions or problems;
- they fit in their class better;
- they were less satisfied with how long it takes to register or correct registration problems;
- administration staff were more helpful in answering questions;
- their age seemed to get more in the way of their interactions with fellow students;
- departmental rules made their goals more difficult to attain;
- campus policies and procedures were more adult student friendly (Administration Scale); and
- their advisers were more responsive to their needs (Advising Scale) (see Table D2).

With very few exceptions, the university seemed like a more "adult student-friendly" place than it had when they entered the program a few years earlier.

Table D2: *Mattering Scale for Adult Students in Higher Education*

MHE	Student t	Level of Significance
#2	-3.05	.01
#5	-2.75	.02
#18	-3.29	.01
#19	-2.45	.03
#28	-2.41	.03
#29	-2.43	.03
#35	-3.23	.01
#42	-3.67	.00
Admin Scale	-2.80	.02
Advising Scale	-3.29	.01

To summarize, as the study participants exited the program, their experience of being an adult student within this educational environment was significantly more positive in many respects (e.g., support from classmates, advisers, and campus staff generally) than it had been at the beginning. However, their level of frustration with certain institutional procedures was significantly higher (e.g., with the registrar and the program department). They seemed to feel that they "mattered" significantly more now to classmates, and to the administration and faculty, than they did upon entry into the program. As well, they handled the last stage of this transition in a generally more positive manner—as evidenced by their shift away from primarily managing their stress to taking steps to reduce or eliminate it altogether.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Readers should keep in mind that the small number (15) and the specific nature of the study group (working adult professionals) may restrict the generalizability of the following comments about the stress that was experienced and the coping strategies that were acquired over time by these online learners.

As they moved into the MCE program, the students in this study coped with this unfamiliar and stressful situation by using emotion-focused strategies, which attempt to manage stress, rather than problem-focused strategies, which attempt to change the situation. At this point in the coping process, they felt that their personal resources (such as emotional energy) were low, and that their support system was not as strong as they desired. As they moved from here to the middle of the program, their sense of control over the situation and the resources available to them appeared to increase, while their coping strategies remained primarily focused on managing stress. At the midpoint, multiple role demands were very energy consuming and the home support system was still seen as inadequate, but they appeared to be starting to discover a strong academic support system in their classmates and in the university faculty and staff. It was not until students were actually moving out of the program that "taking action," or problem-focused, coping strategies began to appear. At this time, there was a decrease in the amount of disruption that being in the program was causing in their other life relationships and roles and an increase in their use of a number of diverse coping strategies.

The students' perceptions of the "student friendliness" of the university environment seemed to be strongly related to how well they were handling stress at any particular stage of the transition coping process. Their ability to cope seemed to be positively related to the extent to which they felt that the university administration acknowledged the competing demands on their time and the extent to which it acted as a resource, rather than a barrier, to their end goal of successful program completion.

This study's findings were consistent with those of previous studies of students in traditional face-to-face educational environments. However, this study also made some intriguing discoveries about the sense of support and empowerment that were experienced by these adult students studying at a distance. In terms of support, having dependents living at home, which might be expected to add to the adult students' role conflict and demands, actually appeared to provide them with valuable emotional and practical support, perhaps because older adult students would tend to have older, more mature dependents. In terms of empowerment, being self-employed, which might be expected to add to role strain and fatigue, appeared instead to bolster adult students' sense of professional status and competence while in a role and an environment that traditionally foster a sense of personal disempowerment.

The students who participated in this study were successful in their program despite the lack of a formal student support system. The "roller coaster" ride of student life (including the initial lower-than-expected level of family/community support, the inability to shift from a limited repertoire of coping responses until the end of the program, and a persistent sense of being marginal members of the academic community) may have been somewhat smoother had such a formal support system been in place. It has been amply demonstrated that the ability of undergraduate and graduate "residential" students to cope with the stresses of moving into, through, and out of educational programs can be increased with effective face-to-face intervention (Arthur & Hiebert, 1993; Schlossberg et al., 1991; Willment, 1999).

As more and more educational programs move into distance-delivery formats, distance educators and administrators would be well advised not only to offer effective distance-delivered support systems to their students, but also to create more adult student-friendly and adult student-centred educational environments. A model of support services for this group of adult students needs to acknowledge their multiple-life role demands, their need for transition coping strategy development, and the current institutional barriers that they are likely to encounter. In order to be accessible to these students, it makes sense that this support system would capitalize on the communication capabilities of distance technology. Doing so in innovative ways would allow students to easily access one another, their instructors, and other key resource people, such as librarians, personal counsellors, and administrative staff (Wiesenberg, 1996).

A wealth of potential models and resources for developing this kind of support system currently exists in the field of counselling adults (Schlossberg et al., 1991; 1995). Building on Potter's (1998) model, which already addresses academic issues at four points in students' tenure—pre-enrolment, starting the program, moving through the program, and leaving the program—could be a starting point. Personal coping issues could also be addressed at these four points. Given the increased interaction amongst and between students and instructors when using distance communication technologies, it makes sense to capitalize on the instructor's potential to support students' personal, professional, and academic growth, either directly within their instructional role or indirectly as referral agents. Effective online teachers appear to take on four functionally distinct moderator roles: pedagogical (subject matter expert); managerial (planner and organizer); technical (troubleshooter); and social (facilitator of learning community that promotes academic and personal growth) (Berge, 1995; 1998). The social moderator role offers the online teacher the opportunity to provide support to students who are experiencing stress. As well, online teachers can reduce student stress and increase effective coping by being flexible about assignment deadlines and formats and by encouraging collaborative rather than competitive learning projects (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Wiesenberg & Hutton, 1996). Teachers can also act as online referral agents to connect students to counsellors equipped to deal with in-depth personal or career issues.

The literature on online learning consistently describes how an effective online learning environment encourages the creation of strong, supportive learning communities. It is this particular capability of online communication systems that is conducive to online educational counselling (Higgison, 2000; Hiltz, 1994; Wiesenberg, 1999; Wiesenberg & Hutton, 1996). In order to improve the student friendliness of the university environment, CMC software can be used to create online linkages to any part of the university administration network (such as the registrar's or student finance office). This would give students direct and much more efficient access to these services than is currently the case with existing face-to-face procedures that were developed for on-campus students. Successful and instructive examples of how to convert traditional face-to-face student support services to online delivery are starting to appear in the literature and online (Brigham, 2001; Phillips & Kelly, 2000; Sattem, Reynolds, Bernhardt, & Burdeshaw, 2000).

For the e-learning evolution to reach all those who desire and/or need it, educational institutions must start to pay more than lip service to the stresses and competing role demands of adult distance education students. Offering this group of learners an accessible, comprehensive, and user-friendly support system, in addition to creating more adult-friendly campuses, would go a long way towards helping all online learners navigate their present "roller coaster" life.

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