Diapers and downloads:
How young mothers negotiate the pressures of finishing their secondary school education online

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Ontario Institute for Studies in Education University of Toronto

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Abstract

Online learning is increasingly regarded as a way to accommodate the needs of students who are compromised by geography, health, and socio-economic status. This research examines the experiences of young single mothers who are enrolled in online courses in order to graduate from secondary school. With the promise of anytime, anywhere education, women who have not been able to complete secondary school enroll in online courses with an expectation that they will be able to care for their children and complete courses while at home with relative ease. Using the dual lenses of poststructuralism and critical theory, this research investigates how the prevailing assumptions concerning the benefits of online learning accord with the experiences of this particular group of women and how the dominant societal discourses surrounding educative technologies are reflected in the women’s utterances.
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1.0 Introduction

I need to preface this research with an emphatic statement – I am a strong advocate for the use of technology in educative contexts. It is this statement that has motivated me to examine the topic of K-12 online learning (also called e-learning)\(^1\) and its inherent social, economic, political, and pedagogical implications. When I say that I strongly advocate for the use of technologies in the classroom, I do not say this lightly. My adult life has been immersed in technology; beginning with taking rudimentary programing courses at the University of Toronto in the 1980s, to programing in DOS creating interactive databases and then becoming an early innovator with Macintosh graphic technology in the mid-1980s. In the late 1990s as a mother with young children entering the school system, I became interested in the use of technologies in education. I spent a good many volunteer hours at the local elementary school assisting teachers and teacher-librarians bringing multimedia project-based learning into their classrooms. After earning my teaching degree in 2002, I brought technology into my own secondary school\(^2\) classes. In 2005 I became interested in Moodle technology and started using blended learning to enhance my teaching. I have also been an ongoing member of various school board and school-wide technology integration initiatives; and for the past five years, a third of my teaching timetable has been devoted to teaching fully online classes. I feel it is safe to say that I bring a good deal of experience to this research with respect to the pedagogical implications of using technologies in schools. It is from this vantage point that I approached the work of examining the experiences of young mothers taking e-learning courses with my local school board’s adult, online education program.

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\(^1\) For the purposes of this paper, e-learning (or online learning) refers to learning that takes place using computers via the Internet. This type of learning, while primarily remote and asynchronous can involve synchronous communication with the instructor and classmates. For this paper, e-learning is NOT referring to blended learning which involves face-to-face classroom time on a regular basis.

\(^2\) I have used the term “secondary school” and “high school” interchangeably in this study.
I came to this research project as an educator who is concerned by the lack of empirical studies being conducted in the area of K-12 online learning, particularly when it is beginning to represent a significant budget line for many school boards in Canada (Barbour & International Association for K-12, 2012) and is the focus of considerable teacher professional development (not to mention anxiety). While there have been a few studies that critically examine the proliferation of digital technologies in the classroom, most notably Cuban (1986; 2000), and also Convery (2009), the vast majority of the research in this field has been pragmatic and generally under-theorized. Norm Friesen’s 2009 book, Re-Thinking E-Learning Research emphatically calls for a “a ground clearing exercise” with respect to current e-learning research (Friesen, 2009, p. 181). In this same book Friesen calls for a move away from positivist epistemologies and to embrace qualitative research methodologies as a way to create thick description of the lived experiences around teaching and learning with technology (Friesen, 2009, p. 14). It is with these positions in mind that I entered into this research; examining the lives of young mothers who are earning high school credits while they care for their young children.

1.1 Why this research?

In Canada, e-learning for K-12 students is seen as a solution for a number of educational issues. These issues include over-crowding, lack of course selection in some locations, teacher shortages in remote areas and the challenge of accommodating students who need to study from a different location or at a different time (Barbour & International Association for K-12, 2012). There is a huge potential for online learning in Canada to supply curriculum to isolated and disadvantaged areas of the country. The sheer geography of Canada makes e-learning a natural choice for education; however, there appears to be a lack of connection between the purpose of providing secondary school students with e-learning options and the actual outcomes of these...
learning experiences. While e-learning is supposed to bridge gaps (such as geography, health, and socio-economic status) experienced by students, it is not clear that the students who are the intended targets of these programs do actually benefit from them. Typically, the successful e-learning student is independent, motivated, and has substantial support at home (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Young people who attempt to complete their secondary school education after the age of 18 are often faced with many additional obstacles to completing this goal. The focus of this research is on one segment of this over 18 group – young, single mothers in a large Canadian city.

Historically, women have formed a significant portion of distance learners in Canada; and since the late 1990s, women have been the majority of online learners in this country (Kelland, 2011). Many young mothers who have not been able to complete their secondary schooling in Ontario enroll in e-learning courses to earn the credits they need in order to graduate. Young mothers in particular are influenced by the hyperbole surrounding the benefits of e-learning courses and regard them as a flexible alternative to attending a bricks and mortar school. With the promise of anytime, anywhere education, women who have not been able to complete secondary school enroll in online courses with an expectation that they will be able to care for their children and complete courses online at home with relative ease. On a personal level, I was struck by the complexity of the lives of some of the students taking my course when I was teaching in an adult online education program. One such student, while looking after her five-year-old son and attending to her seriously ill father in the hospital, somehow managed to participate in an online conference with me in order to discuss an assignment. Juxtaposed against idealistic Ministry documents such as The Sky is the Limit!, the realities of most of my online
students did not even remotely resemble the utopian images and enthusiastic messages published in these materials.

As a high school geography teacher with a strong commitment to social justice education, I am compelled by earlier theoretical literature such as that of Freire (2000) and Giroux (2002) that informs the critical framework that I draw upon as I seek to understand e-learning within its contemporary social context. As a woman in the still male-dominated field of ICT, I am influenced by poststructural feminism which emphasizes that knowledge and identity are social constructs and as such, are subject to the intersections of gender, race, class and sexuality (Davies & Gannon, 2005). Using multiple lenses of critical and poststructural theory, social constructivism and discourse analysis, I have analyzed the experiences of young mothers as they attempt to complete their high school education by taking e-learning courses through an adult education program offered by an urban school board in Canada. Given the growing popularity of online learning in the K-12 setting and the fact that these programs are particularly appealing to young mothers, it is crucial to examine the experiences of these women as they attempt to complete their secondary school education online. As such, I have been guided by these questions as I conducted this research:

• How do the prevailing assumptions surrounding the benefits of online learning for young women with children accord with their actual experiences?

• How do the larger societal discourses regarding online learning manifest themselves in the experiences of single mothers taking online secondary school courses?
2.0 Theoretical Framework

As I searched wildly for a how to manual on how to write a Master’s thesis, I came across an article by Packwood & Sikes (1996) which convinced me to abandon my quest for the perfect research recipe – it simply does not exist. In fact, the metaphor of research as a recipe is pervasive because it conforms to an interpretation of the scientific method where the author of a study constructs a privileged representation of a particular social reality where they have the single, correct interpretation of the data (Packwood & Sikes, 1996). Below is a discussion of the various theoretical frames that have informed the approach to this study; social constructivism, poststructural feminism, and discourse analysis. While each school of thought exists as a discrete theoretical framework, they also clearly converge, allowing me to historicize and politicize online learning in a wider societal context while considering the personal and individual experiences of the young mothers in this study.

2.1 The postmodern turn

Research into the use of technology in education serves to highlight the inherent debates within the epistemological spheres of the social sciences and the so-called ‘hard’ sciences. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a paradigm of two distinct types of knowledge; positivist, objective logico-scientific knowledge versus critical, reflexive hermeneutic knowledge (Lyotard, 1984). This categorization has served to compartmentalize online learning research in the positivist category and therefore insulate it from messier political and societal concerns. By asking the question, “who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?” (1984, p. 9), Lyotard introduces an alternative perspective. Lyotard argues that claims of scientific knowledge representing the truth are rooted in linguistic practices that have declared those claims legitimate by those who hold institutional and cultural power.
E-learning research, like most research in education generally has been logico-scientific, relying on *testability*, *reliability* and *validity*, but also producing a large quantity of results that illustrate no *significant difference* (Barbour, Siko, Sumara, & Simuel-Everage, 2012; Friesen, 2009, 2012). We have a desire to supersede professional judgments in educational research and conduct studies using *objective* double blind experiments – an approach commonly used for drug testing. However, as Norm Friesen (2009, p. viii) points out “education is not a pill” and with postmodern epistemologies, the very terms *data*, *validity*, *authenticity* and *voice* are all under suspicion (Lather, 2012). In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard describes our epistemological moment as beyond the grand narratives of scientific knowledge:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define [the] postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives… The [meta]narrative function is losing its functions, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements… Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv).

Postmodern researchers suggest that education research, particularly that involving technology, move away from positivist models and towards what Lather (2012, referring to Delueze) has called “a thousand tiny paradigms”. There is no particularly methodological instrumentality with this type of research because each piece of datum is approached as its own, unique part of the research picture; postmodernism approaches research from multiple angles and directions. As suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), I have regard myself as “researcher-as-bricoleur-theorist [working] between and within competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms” (pg. 6).
2.2 Social Constructivism

A social constructivist approach to research adheres to the idea that there is an inevitable historical and socio-cultural dimension to the construction of knowledge; and opposes the ideas that there is one reality out there and that knowledge is a mirror of that reality (Schwandt, 2000). Like critical theory, social constructivism assumes that all knowledge is interested, political, permeated with values and ideologically invested (Schwandt, 2000). Instead of searching for validity by bracketing the researcher’s biases and attempting to approach the data objectively, a social constructivist embraces one’s own biases and subjectivities as part of the research process. Rather than searching for statistical significance, the validity of social constructivist research lies in its ability to uncover hidden social myths and political agendas and to transform existing social realities (Strega, 2005). Key to the social constructivist approach is the idea that we dwell in socially constructed language or discourse and that “our existence as persons has no fundamental essence, we can only ever speak ourselves or be spoken into existence within the terms of available discourses” (Davies, 1991 in Strega, 2005).

All human action and experience is shaped by tools and sign systems that we communicate through (Vygotsky in Oliver, 2011). Consider Roland Barthe’s theorizing on societal myth as a semiological system. Barthes refers to three terms in semiotics; the signifier, the signified, and the signification – which is the myth itself. In Barthe’s terms, denotation is the simple, basic descriptive level of meaning – consensus is wide as to the meaning. For example, the noun sock refers to a garment worn on the foot – there are no other ways to interpret a sock. The connotation is the second type of code, for example the term fashion has wider semantic fields with no obvious singular meaning. The word fashion is full of cultural meaning and myth. In Barthes’ most famous explanation of societal mythology, he uses the example of a magazine
cover with a photograph of a black, French soldier looking at the French flag. Barthes asks what is the photograph saying? In stage one of our understanding, the signifiers and the concepts come together to make one message; a black soldier salutes the French flag. Stage two reveals a broad, ideological theme about French colonialism. The myth in this case is about French imperialism and the faithful black soldier son who loves France. The signification of the photograph is tied to the totality of twentieth century imperialism and appeals to a certain group of readers while insulting another – by necessity (Barthes, 1972). Theorizing entrenched societal and politicized understandings of e-learning using Barthes’ Mythologies has allowed me to begin to understand how hegemonic metanarratives about educational technology are constructed and held in place.

2.3 Feminist Poststructuralism

Poststructural feminism is focused on issues of positionality and difference, the existence of multiple intersecting systems of power, privilege and oppression, the deconstruction of binary categories, and the existence of shifting and fluid identities (Tisdell, 1998). Feminist poststructural theory has evolved as a response to the perceived limitations of previous psychological and structural theoretical shortcomings and increasing criticisms of humanist theories regarding the nature of reality (Kelland, 2011; Lawlor, 2013; St. Pierre, 2000). While liberal humanism views the self as with agency; “conscious, stable, unified, rational, coherent, knowing, autonomous and ahistoric, the individual or the subject in poststructural feminism is seen as being unknowable, full of contradictions and in the process of constantly being reconstituted by socially constructed discourses” (St. Pierre, 2000). Poststructuralism rejects the notions of the autonomous self and free will; all choices are understood as forced choices. It is the individual’s placement within a particular discourse that dictates their chosen course of action in any particular circumstance and it is one’s placement within that particular discourse
that makes them want to choose that line of action.

Poststructural feminism brings together two different (and sometimes contradictory) theoretical paradigms that work together to trouble existing ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies (Pierre & Pillow, 2000). Feminism has traditionally been seen as structural theory, more aligned with critical pedagogy or a psychological theory about women’s ways of knowing. As a structural theory, feminism has been focused on emancipatory outcomes and challenging patriarchy. These different interpretations of feminism have created tensions between the political goals of more traditional feminism and poststructuralism, which is seen by some as a purely intellectual exercise that yields no emancipatory action. Despite these tensions, there is a growing field of academics who regard poststructural feminism as a way to apply feminist critique within a poststructural framework, allowing for social justice outcomes (Lather, 2000; Strega, 2005).

Feminist poststructural thought is ultimately crucial for this study because it allows me to recognize that every learning environment is extremely complex and all learners’ experiences are unique. Poststructuralism offers a much more nuanced understanding of the productive forces of power; recognizing that power is not fixed and stable, but is characterized by an action and reaction between people. Each power interaction is negotiated, making power a relational force, working in a web-like fashion, operating everywhere and in contradictory ways (Strega, 2005). The lens of poststructural feminism brings into focus the meta-narratives of progress and individualism that move society towards ever increasing self-surveillance and self-discipline. It also provides an instrument for understanding how the women in this study construct their complex and often contradictory identities as mothers, young women, and high school students.
2.4 Foucauldian discourse and the Postmodern ‘micro-narrative’

According to Foucault (1980), at historically specific periods, power and social and institutional practices come together to produce particular ways of thinking, understanding, being and doing. Things have meaning and are the truth only within a specific historical context. For example, the way society views mental illness is constantly in flux; it makes no sense to talk of the hysterical woman outside of the 19th century (Hall, 2001). Knowledge about and practices around all subjects are historically and culturally specific. For example the way we regard educational technologies and the proliferation of online learning is particular to our current societal, political and cultural circumstances. These ways are referred to in the Foucauldian literature as regimes of truth; the discourses that society counts as true and, therefore weld significant power. Consider the pervasive discourse, or regime of truth in our society about the children of single parents growing up to be delinquent. The common sense societal response that follows this truth has been punishment for single parents because they are seen as deviant and outside the normative, hetero, dual parent, nuclear family. Knowledge, therefore, is the byproduct of these discourses and discourse organizes social relations as power relations, effectively masking the working of this power. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault (1977) argues that individuals are guided by the disciplinary knowledge imbedded in our society. According to Foucault, we are constantly measuring ourselves against a version of normal. If we consider schooling as an example, grades are a way in which we are measured as normal or acceptable. We are graded over and over again, and eventually, as we internalize the process of being evaluated by societal norms, we move from surveillance to self-surveillance (van der Gee, 2014). We may feel free, but our subjectivities are shaped by constant surveillance mechanisms that operate internally and through institutions and social practices. Power, therefore, does not move
top to bottom or in a single chain; power circulates in a net-like organization. Caught up in this net are the both the oppressors and the oppressed (Hall, 2001). “When discipline is effective power operates through persons rather than upon them” (Usher and Edwards, 1995 in Strega 2005), thus allowing for the internalization of disciplinary knowledges; self-reliance, life-long learning, and the notion that education is an individual pursuit.

In the language of Jean Paul Lyotard (1984), these dominant discourses are the meta-narratives of our times. Lyotard questioned the supremacy of the meta-narrative in pluralistic, postmodern societies and proposed that the grand narratives, such as Hegelian dialectics and Marxist class theory be replaced by little stories or micro-narratives that are “provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative” to the particular situation and population of concern (O’Donovan, 2006, p. 475). With respect to this study, the meta-narratives are the myths, or common sense notions that our society has about educational technologies, online learning, second-chance education opportunities and the needs of single mothers. Deconstructing societal meta-narratives into individual micro-narratives has allowed me to problematize the taken-for-granted truths and realities of the participants’ e-learning realities by carefully examining their own individual experiences. By examining the micro-narratives located within the lived experiences of students engaged in online learning, I have attempted to problematize their utterances not as pure reflections of their experiences, but as socially constructed discourses that reflect this particular historical moment.
3.0 Literature Review

There is very little published literature on the topic of K-12 online learning experiences and none focuses specifically on the experiences of young mothers taking online courses to finish high school. This literature review touches on a variety of topics that have relevance to this research. I begin with a brief overview of e-learning in Canada, then look at some of the limited research available on at-risk students learning online. Although not all of the women in this study were teenagers at the time of interview, three of the four were in their teens when they had their children; therefore I have included a brief examination of secondary school completion and teen child-bearing. The most significant portion of this literature review is a look at the critical and poststructural thought surrounding educative technologies and online learning specifically.

3.1 History of K-12 e-learning in Canada

Distance education, mostly in the form of correspondence courses, has been available in Canada for about one hundred years (Barbour & International Association for K-12, 2012). In 1919, the first correspondence school in Canada opened in British Columbia and enrolled 80 students that year, mostly living in remote locations such as lighthouses or isolated logging and fishing communities (Barbour & International Association for K-12, 2012). In less industrialized areas of the world, online learning for the K-12 population is seen as a strategy for social and economic development (Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark, 2009). As a development initiative, there is a huge potential for online learning in Canada to supply curriculum to remote and disadvantaged areas of the country. Online alternatives for K-12 students are also regarded as a way of coping with shortages of teachers for specific subject areas, over-crowding, and the challenges of providing public education for students who need to study away from a school setting for a variety of reasons.
In 2000, the Canadian Teachers Federation estimated that there were approximately 25,000 K-12 students enrolled in one or more e-learning courses during the 1999 – 2000 school year. This represented a mere 0.005% of the K-12 student population. Ten years later, Barbour (2011b) indicated there were 182,096 students, representing more than 4.2% of the total K-12 population. It is clear that with this type of growth in K-12 online learning, the literature has not kept up (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; M. Barbour, Siko, Sumara, & Simuel-Everage, 2012; Cavanaugh et al., 2009). The majority of the literature has been focused on defining and describing the benefits and challenges of K-12 online learning and providing comparisons to traditional face-to-face schooling models. Published research regarding the experiences of K-12 students in the online environment is extremely limited, with only a handful of studies available at the time of this paper (Barbour et al., 2012). These studies showed that most students enjoyed the freedom and flexibility of online learning, but the students also stated that the work could be overwhelming at times with too many assignments. Barbour & Stewart (2008) found that students particularly liked to use synchronous tools such as chat rooms and video conferencing. Studies have shown that some K-12 students struggle with independent learning, lack of direct support and technical problems (Barbour, Siko, et al., 2012; Cavanaugh et al., 2009). Students often turn to their face-to-face schoolmates to help them overcome difficulties with the material (Barbour, McLaren, & Zhang, 2012; Barbour, Siko, et al., 2012). I found no studies that looked at the experiences of adults taking secondary school courses online.

3.2 Vulnerable or “at-risk” students and e-learning

The vast majority of K-12 online learning students are self-motivated, academically capable and independent learners who have an abundance of support at home (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; M. K. Barbour & Stewart, 2008; Cavanaugh et al., 2009; and others). Some claims
of online learning are that it provides expanded access to education, high quality learning opportunities, improved student outcomes and numerous administrative efficiencies (Barbour, 2013; Churchill, 2010). In contrast, there is research that does not support the claim of universally improved student outcomes and concludes that only the traditionally successful students obtain good results in online learning courses at the K-12 level (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Despite the fact that the research does not support the use of online learning for students who traditionally have trouble with academic work, the range of students enrolling in online courses is expanding, but the ability to accommodate students with differing educational needs is limited (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Churchill, 2010). K-12 online learning is particularly suited to high achieving students who are successful in traditional classrooms and is not particularly beneficial for at risk students. Students can be deemed at risk for any number of reasons including social situations, economic circumstances, physical disabilities or illnesses and more traditionally, psychological issues; including learning disabilities, behavior, mental health and gaps in education (Churchill, 2010). There is some discussion referring to the at-risk discourse as merely another way of identifying and discriminating against youth who are from visible minorities and other marginalized groups (Gutiérrez, 2006; James, 2012). It is clear from the literature that poverty is the most overwhelming factor contributing to students being at risk of not completing their secondary schooling(Hill & Brown, 2011; James, 2012).

As with K-12 online learning in general, there is not adequate literature focused on the experiences of at risk students taking online courses. Churchill (2010) found that at risk students were successful in the online environment if a number of criteria were met; they self-selected rather than were mandated; they were able to select courses for reasons other than availability; they had some prior online learning experience, they participated in the online community within
the courses, and; the online teacher built and maintained a community of learners. Churchill (2010) also argues that at risk students taking online courses must be provided with preregistration counseling, online pre-assessment, the availability of mentors, orientation classrooms and weekly contact between the teacher and the parent or guardian.

3.3 Secondary school completion and teen child bearing

While the trend of teenage pregnancy is in a long term decline in Canada, the rate has leveled off since 2001 and some areas, most notably Atlantic Canada, have experienced an increase in teenage pregnancy (McKay, 2012). In 2010, the birthrate for women aged 15-19 was 13.5 per 1,000 (McKay, 2012), which is a significant number of children being born to women of high school age. Having a child during the teenage years is associated with negative outcomes for females as young women bear most of the costs associated with having a child (Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2010). Most significantly, having a child at a young age (before the age of 21) results in lower educational attainment (Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2010). First child births before the age of 18 are associated with low rates of secondary school completion and these women are likely to not graduate from secondary school even at the age of 28 (Al-Sahab, Heifetz, Tamim, Bohr, & Connolly, 2012; Ou & Reynolds, 2013).

Canada has approximately 20,000 teen births per year and similar to the U.S. and Great Britain, these mothers tend to be high risk minority women from large, single-parent families who live below the national poverty level and whose parents have no post-secondary education (Al-Sahab et al., 2012; Ou & Reynolds, 2013). Teenaged mothers are also more likely to have taken part in a dangerous activity while pregnant such as using street drugs or carrying a weapon (Al-Sahab et al., 2012). Moreover, in the Canadian context, Aboriginal women are four times more likely to be pregnant in their teen years then the rest of the Canadian population (Al-Sahab
et al., 2012; McKay, 2012). There are multiple studies that have looked at the career and income-earning outcomes of teen mothers and indicate that these women face additional hardships, low educational attainment and much lower income levels than women who postpone having children (Hansen, Hawkes, & Joshi, 2009; Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2010; Miller, 2011).

Single and young motherhood is associated with social and moral stigmatization; these women are almost exclusively dependent on the state and do not fit the moral standards of mothering, that is, middleclass and in a nuclear, hetero-normative family structure (Baker, 2009; Ferguson, 2013). Guided by public policy that is increasingly focused on self-sufficiency and personal responsibility, single mothers, particularly young ones, have been the objects of much public scrutiny and programing (Baker, 2009; Ferguson, 2013). Welfare reform, such as the Ontario Works program make it necessary for recipients, such as single mothers, to be actively participating in educational programs or training workshops that can facilitate the stoppage of welfare payments as soon as possible (Maki, 2011; Wilson, 2013). In another light, a 2008 Statistics Canada study indicated that education can mitigate the damaging effects of teen motherhood and, in fact, women who gave birth to children as teenagers were just as likely as women who gave birth as adults to work full year, full time given that their education levels were the same (Luong, 2008). This information bodes well for young mothers who are trying to obtain their secondary school diplomas by enrolling in second chance or adult education programs online, but there is conflicting literature as to the utility and ultimate political purpose of providing education programs for single mothers (Baker, 2009; Ferguson, 2013; Maki, 2011; Wilson, 2013).
3.4 Critical and poststructural thinking about technology in education

Despite the inherent differences between critical theory and poststructuralism, they share many similarities with respect to their analytical capabilities, and it is for this purpose that I combine the two theories as a way of reviewing the literature that problematizes technology. (See also Friesen, 2009; N. Selwyn, 2010; Neil Selwyn, 2013; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005; Zembylas, 2008 and others.) Both critical theory and poststructuralism share the idea that reality is not what it seems and maintain that reality is a naturalized version of a certain constellation of being that has evolved historically (van der Ree, 2014). Our realities have been manipulated in such a way that we are desensitized to the amount of violence and power operating all around us. The purpose of both critical theory and poststructuralism is to denaturalize a culturally and politically embedded social order that comes across as common sense or natural and expose the existing cultural mythology, dominant discourses and meta-narratives that drive our attitudes concerning technology in education. This section begins with a brief overview of neoliberal ideology and its impact on education, then proceeds with a more theoretical approach to thinking about technology in education specifically.

3.4.1 Neoliberal ideology and education as a self-improvement project

Neoliberalism is a political, economic and social set of meanings that has emerged from a number of historical and global economic factors, not the least of which is the emphasis on free trade and economic globalization over the last 35 years (Carpenter, Weber, & Schugurensky, 2012; Olssen & Peters, 2005). As an ideology, neoliberalism is an extension of the libertarian principles of individual freedoms, self motivation, responsibility and entrepreneurship at the personal level. Neoliberal policies have led to an erosion of the welfare state resulting in less security in publicly funded elements and infrastructures and diminished services. The resulting
public rhetoric lauds smaller government, less taxation, less public funding and increased responsibility for the private sector and individuals (Carpenter et al., 2012). Neoliberal economies work to redistribute wealth rather than generate capital (Harvey, 2005); in this new economic reality, forms of production are largely immaterial and profit is gained from the production of knowledge by way of informational labour (Selwyn, 2013). This reorganization and reimaging of economic policies and the role of the public sector has had a profound impact on, not just the delivery of education, but the way in which we regard education.

Neoliberalism extends notions of self-responsibility with explicit belief in consumer choice and market freedom and the dominance of private interests over that of the state; in this way, one of the primary roles of the citizen in the neoliberal state is to consume. As public and social services become increasingly commodified, education becomes more of a consumptive practice and associated with self-help and self-improvement (Baker, 2009; Harvey, 2005; Selwyn, 2013). In the language of neoliberalism, education is an individual self-improvement project where each individual is responsible for his or her own actions and well-being. With a heightened emphasis on individuated personhood and a burgeoning cultural fascination with self improvement and extreme makeovers, there is an increasing interest in providing education for women as a post-feminist expression of the perfectibility of the self (Baker, 2009; McRobbie, 2006). The regulatory function of neoliberalism to discipline subjects towards readying themselves to enter the global market is seductive and deceptive because its authority is internalized by the subject (Baker, 2009; Selwyn, 2013; K. M. Smith & Jeffery, 2013). Discourses of free choice and free will prevail and the neoliberal subject is understood to be free from the traditional ties of race, class and gender; is wholly self-produced and is the agent of their own success or failure (Baker, 2009). There is a strong connection between everyday
technology use and the hegemony of contemporary, neoliberal capitalist society (Selwyn, 2013); for example, office technologies such as laptops have insinuated themselves into our private lives, thus extending flexible working practices into our daily lives. The working day and, by extension, the school day are now extended to 24/7 as the e-learning model of education promotes the idea of *anytime* education. Selwyn (2013) refers to this extension of the work/school day as being in a “state of total pedagogization” (p. 133) meaning that we are in an *always on* state of potential educational engagement – *always learning* has become a neoliberal rallying cry and an economic imperative.

3.4.2 Problematizing educational technology

Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology (Heidegger, 1954, p. 1).

Like fish swimming in water, we are blind to the electronic technology that surrounds us in our daily lives. As Martin Heidegger asserts, not only are we blind to technology and its effects, we are chained to this technology; regarding these devices and networks as necessary to our lives and inherently good. Nowhere is the observation more prevalent than in the field of education, where for decades teachers have been sold on the idea that electronic technologies such as computers, smartphones and other devices are the only way forward. In fact, since the 1980s, teaching with technology has been made policy in most school districts in North America and Europe (Convery, 2009; Cuban, 1986; Selwyn, 2011). Of particular concern is the

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1 I would attribute this notion of the fish in water to someone, but I am uncertain as to the origin of this idea. I heard Megan Boler say this in a lecture once and then found that it has been said by, among others, Marshall McLuhan in 1966 and Albert Einstein in 1936 – perhaps it is clichéd.
accelerated pace at which online learning has proliferated in the schooling system across all levels. Some jurisdictions in the U.S. have made e-learning courses mandatory in their secondary school curriculum and it is predicted that it will not be long before these policies are introduced in Canada (Barbour, 2013; Barbour, Siko, Sumara, & Simuel-Everage, 2012). We are at a distinct moment in education history when the propagation of online education has reached a state of being mythologized; the seeming benevolent nature of this technology has purified it, made it innocent and depoliticized (Barthes, 1972).

According to Foucault (1980), all knowledge, even scientific or common sense knowledge is historical and political in nature. In this way our knowledge and understanding of technology is a product of this particular historical moment, producing a set of truths that are particular to this point in time. At this specific juncture, the dominant ideology or regime of truth is that technology is singularly crucial to progress in the field of education. However, this truth, like all other truths is fluid, arbitrary, and open to interpretation. As such, prevailing common sense ideologies that appear to be pure and free of political interest, neutral and objective, critical theorists would call most interested (Adorno, 1993 in Friesen, 2009). E-learning and its accompanying technologies are particularly prone to claims of common sense and are, therefore subject to what Friesen (2009) refers to as mythical inevitabilities and what Megan Boler (2007) calls hypes; online learning is for anyone, anytime and the usual barriers of class, race, ethnicity and gender are not present; we must prepare young people for the knowledge economy resulting in an urgent plea to educate our children to be knowledge builders; technology shapes society and social practices such as teaching and learning can be altered and even disrupted by technology. This type of pedagogy does not consider the by-products or unexpected consequences of using technology, nor does it address the ways in which dominant discourses of
White, middleclass, heterosexual and English language function in an online classroom (Hughes, 2007). As a society, we are drawn into a utopian vision which views online learning technologies as free from material constraints and oppression – they are digital democracies (Brown, 2009). The idea that the proliferation of e-learning is a common sense and natural progression of our education system needs to be questioned and challenged by exposing the inherent mythologies and the ethical considerations that surround these technologies.

Sherry Turkle (1995) echoes Heidegger’s concerns about technology by maintaining that we are increasingly willing to suspend our disbelief at what we see on the computer screen and take things at interface value, but do not understand the machinations under the interface; in this way we are blind to the essence of technology, but entirely beholden to it. The technology that we use for online learning is opaque to us; the technology is neatly hidden underneath a user-friendly WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get), icon-driven operating system that has nothing to do with the code behind it (Oliver, 2011; Turkle, 1995). Turkle goes on to argue that not only do we use computers to communicate and organize our lives, but we create relationships with these things – they provide a simulation, but also they become our reality. We enjoy this manipulated façade and don’t particularly care how it was constructed. User-content interactions in online learning courses are also merely simulations of face-to-face courses, but without the messy reality of real humans in the same temporal and spatial realm (Selwyn, 2013; Turkle, 2012).

3.4.3 Digital democracies

The Internet is regarded by proponents of online learning as a new democratic frontier for education, with online learning available to anyone at any time; allowing learners and instructors to overcome space, time and even the body. Megan Boler (2002, 2007) refers to a digital
*Cartesianism* where our *machine* bodies are finally out of the way, no longer polluting the purity of the mind. However, the online world and the *real* world are not sharp binaries; identities are constructed online and markers of race, class, gender and sexuality are not easily erased. Without the body’s role as the final arbiter of identity, people online make essential links between what is partially revealed by the Other (e.g. a name) and the stereotypical ideas that are housed in the subconscious (Boler, 2007). The intersecting systems of oppression and privilege, like gender, race, class and sexual orientation are alive and well in the online classroom (Lawlor, 2013) and the superficial interactions that we have with people are not likely to elicit experiences related to oppression. In other words, the superficial nature of online learning means that it is highly unlikely that students will be able to engage in *defiant speech* and *talking back* in order to confront inequalities and systems of oppression while they are in e-learning classrooms (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005). Boler (2002) refers to this phenomenon as *drive by difference*, maintaining that it is very difficult to listen deeply and attentively to the Other online.

Computer mediated classrooms supposedly remove discrimination and exclusion because text-based communication, like that found in e-mail or discussion boards, provides a non-coercive and anti-hierarchical environment for dialogue with equality of opportunity for all participants (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005). Additionally, the open-endedness of text on the computer screen subverts the idea of master narratives or definitive readings because the reader is free to interact with the text, create hyperlinks, edit and change meanings, creating fluid, nonlinear and opaque interpretations (Turkle, 1995). In a sense, this utopian vision of online learning invokes the potential of the Kantian notion of the *cosmopolitical*; not just the wide exposure to difference, but the politicization of difference, the recognition of the value of difference (Derrida, 2002). However, learning communities, whether online or face-to-face, are
places of power; power is instantiated in the everyday practices in what people routinely do, and the roles that people play (Foucault, 1980). For example, roles of students or instructors in a course define how people respond and communicate. This positioning of the individual happens not only by way of these formal and prescribed roles but also through our expectations, stereotypes and various responses that are associated with age, class, race and gender. If someone cannot fit into the dominant narratives, they are silenced or excluded (Lawlor, 2013; Tisdell, 1998; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). In fact, it is a fallacy that the flexibility of ICT use leads to a widening in participation in learning – class and educational background (also race and gender) predict whether or not people will participate or even enroll in an online course (Selwyn, 2011). Therefore, on the Internet we are not simply anybody, anywhere – we are positioned in terms of identity, place and time. “Anybody, anyplace, anytime is an abstract and default notion of time and place and of consumption and production – it is also a default person; generally white, middleclass and male” (Friesen, 2009).

### 3.4.4 Online learning as an economic imperative

Technology makes certain actions natural to us and neatly hides the intentions of the designers behind the clever interface (Oliver, 2011). Sherry Turkle argues that this apathetic relationship with our new simulated reality is leading societies to a point where we stop asking what is behind the simulations and simply enjoy them. Thus, our apathetic relationship with the interface leaves us vulnerable to being controlled and manipulated through these systems of communication (Peters, 2010). Using Deleuze, Michael Peters (2010) argues that modern, networked, and interconnected communication systems are supplanting older forms of punishment such as education and health. Peters quotes Deleuze’s Postscript on Societies of Control:
We’re moving toward control societies that no longer operate by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication. One can envisage education becoming less and less a closed site differentiated from the workplace as another closed site, but both disappearing and giving way to frightful continual training, to continual monitoring of worker-schoolkids or bureaucrat-students (Deleuze, 1995; p 174-175 in Peters, 2010).

This passage is particularly prophetic with respect to online teaching and learning formats which inevitably entail an extension of working time as well as an intensified working capacity with respect to course load (K. M. Smith & Jeffery, 2013). Boundaries become blurred in online learning regarding the expectation for instructors’ availability; reports from a Ryerson University survey noted that instructors describe “online teaching as a constant struggle, seven days a week, both night and day, to stay on top of responses to email and monitor students’ posts to course sites” (K. M. Smith & Jeffery, 2013, p. 376). Online teachers also speak of heightened surveillance measures in their online courses which has resulted in loss of autonomy and increased scrutiny, thus risking the creation of the conditions leading to a rise in self-censorship and potential loss of academic freedom (Land & Bayne, 2013). The idea of lifelong learning and distance education is part of the new architecture of control which has been designed to support the so-called global knowledge economy (Peters, 2010, p. 55).

Guided by economic agendas of cost-cutting, staffing efficiencies, budget cuts and expanded course offerings, e-learning is presented to the public benevolently, as a means of providing a formal education to those who would otherwise not have access to an ever-burgeoning knowledge economy. The acquisition of knowledge and the role of higher education is at the center of economic development strategies which stress self-actualization and the individual project of lifelong learning (Friesen & Feenberg, 2007). But, what is the real value of education in today’s society? It used to be about social reproduction, individual autonomy,
responsible citizenship and enlightenment, but now knowledge is seen as a productive force with an emphasis on the natural sciences and technology (Giroux, 2002). Under the knowledge economy rhetoric, education is a service or utility to be sold, used, enhanced and commodified (Giroux, 2002). According to the knowledge economy mythology, the jobs that we need to train people for involve computer programing, software development, web content design, and other knowledge-based jobs. However, most of the jobs that are being created today are in the low paying service sector (Friesen, 2009; Selwyn, 2013). As with factory work in the industrial economy of the last century, marginalized and lower-paying service jobs are structurally necessary to the so-called knowledge economy and are, in effect creating another type of class structure similar to the industrial age.

The neoliberal imperative of lifelong learning feeds into the urgent appeal for knowledge builders, targeting specific groups such as women with children and the unemployed. It promotes these educational opportunities, especially those afforded by online education, as necessary to enter the global job market (K. M. Smith & Jeffery, 2013). For example, online learning can serve to further isolate women who are bound to the responsibilities of young children at home. The efficiencies characteristic of neoliberalism do not allow for the publically funded childcare needed for many women to enroll in courses face-to-face. The neoliberal emphasis of self reliance, flexibility and competitiveness has transformed educational policy into a form of social control and the consequent proliferation of online learning (Selwyn, 2011, 2013; K. M. Smith & Jeffery, 2013). An essential component of the neoliberal education policy is the urgent plea to train knowledge builders and this is a major driver of the common sense and unquestioned promotion of online learning. The notion that technology in the form of e-learning is a natural
and necessary progression of contemporary education systems is easily supported and accepted by a society that has been convinced that technology represents the future of humanity.

3.4.5 Education and technological determinism

The idea of *affordance* provides a deft illustration of the concept of technological determinism; as we think of technology somehow making certain actions permitted, natural, and expected, or common sense (Oliver, 2011). Technological determinism is the belief that technology has inherent qualities that shape society and social practices, including learning, and can even disrupt them and render them obsolete (Friesen & Feenberg, 2007; Oliver, 2011). This idea is exemplified by recent innovations such as Sugata Mitra’s *Hole in the Wall* experiment that maintains the notion that teachers are irrelevant and even invasive to the learning process (Arora, 2010). By placing a networked computer containing specific information, Mitra demonstrated that children could learn about many ideas and concepts without traditional schools and teachers. While Mitra’s innovation does provide access to a type of education to people who have none, there is a larger more insidious side to this idea, and that is the deskilling and removal of teachers from the education system, or at least placing them behind a computer and removing the messy and expensive prospect of teaching in face-to-face proximity. In this way, technology can appear to be driving educational change and even appear to be the *destiny* of education (Friesen, 2009). Educators now face a choice, to either keep up or be left behind. Following the idea of technological determinism, agency is imputed to the technology itself as an unstoppable power of force and of change that can act on its own (Oliver, 2011). Online learning provides us with some compelling counter-examples to the idea of technological determinism with WebCT, Moodle and Blackboard (White & Selwyn, 2012). These technologies have been adapted, and appropriated by universities and colleges as large central management systems. The roles and the
functions within these Learning Management Systems (LMS) are well defined – for example, students, instructors and administrators all have distinct, hierarchical roles within the LMS. In this way, online learning in its present form serves to reinforce rather than disrupt conventional educational practices. Technology, like other human innovations, is socially constructed and negotiated. It is not inevitable or destiny and as such, online learning should be regarded as merely another type of learning experience rather than a panacea for all that is ailing public education.

As a society we are lulled into believing that technical progress is single-handedly impacting education and that this impact is inherently good (Oliver, 2011). Helpful technologies, such as those used in online learning, are accepted as neutral and objective and, as such, have become under-theorized (Gutiérrez, 2006). It is commonly held that technology is somehow imbued with predetermined characteristics that render it as outside, or even above the social conflicts and the political climate that underpin its use in education (Selwyn, 2010). There is nothing inherently educative or ethical about educational technology or online learning, however we are presented with the utopian idea that we are providing access to education to disenfranchised and marginalized groups. In fact, these groups are rarely present at the planning table (Brown, 2009). Therefore, when we study the social sciences, we must look at whole systems, not disaggregated elements, such as technology, which could be taken out of context. Research concerning technology in education cannot draw conclusions about technology per se, thus avoiding the problem of “nomological technological determinism” (Oliver, 2011, p. 378). Technology should always be studied in context, but alongside other elements of education, illustrating how technology can contribute, but not determine the outcome of an activity, thus
avoiding the reductive, essentialized and deterministic explanations of technology’s role in education.

### 3.4.6 Blurring the lines between private and public; women learning online at home

Early in the discussion of women and educational technologies, the primary issue was access to technology and presence in online contexts (Lawlor, 2013; Selwyn, 2012). Today women are the primary users of online education, yet are still seriously underrepresented in technology sectors. In other words, it is women, for the most part, who are taking online courses, but not who are creating them (Kramarae, 2001; Selwyn, 2013). Previous studies of women taking online courses have shown that women choose online courses for current work or family situations, but do not favour it as a way of learning (Kelland, 2011; Kramarae, 2001; Zembylas, 2008). Women, in particular, face a distinctive set of challenges when they decide to return to education. New mothers already face a number of psychological issues such as changing social roles and identity. Introducing online education into this already precarious situation can create increasing tensions as women navigate their new roles as mothers and the demands of taking courses that require a substantial amount of organization and self-motivation.

The ideological and practical separation of the public and private realms has traditionally privileged men and excluded women from a wide range of opportunities and experiences; as women generally have been the primary caregivers for their children and responsible for other household and family duties (Baker, 2009). Online learning serves as an example of how the public and private spheres can overlap and result in anxieties and tensions. Learning in the face-to-face realm has always been regarded as part of the public sphere, i.e. when we go to a bricks and mortar school we are in the public. However, when we are online, we are often nestled in the private realm of our homes, with competing responsibilities to family, household and
personal relationships. This balancing act that women must perform, straddling the private and public spheres, creates multiple tensions and anxieties. There are heavy emotional demands on women who are studying at home and looking after children. There are multiple conflicting values or discourses around equal opportunities for men and women and the more traditional family values of mothering their children and not wishing to use daycare (Zembylas, 2008). Women often question their decision to take courses, whether they have done the right thing. When women are taking online courses they are less likely to be relieved of other responsibilities when they are studying because the school work all takes place in the home (Kramarae, 2001; Zembylas, 2008). Finally, women with family obligations, particularly those with young children, are at a significant disadvantage to those who do not have parental obligations. Mothers with young children taking online courses also report finding them to be lonely and isolating experiences and feel like they are getting very little social interaction or support (see Kelland, 2011; Kramarae, 2001; Selwyn, 2010; Zembylas, 2008).

4.0 Methodologies

It is with some amusement that I recall my initial conception for researching online learning at the adult continuing education level; I was going to conduct an experiment utilizing some sort of online teaching strategy and compare the results with another class that was utilizing another online teaching strategy. I soon realized that there was nothing to compare – in each class was a different group of students, different course material, and a completely different set of circumstances. I began to question whether it was possible to create a control group in education. Since conceiving of this initial research plan, I have learned that much of the research in e-learning is exclusively quantitative in nature and does not address the human cultural contexts in which the teaching and learning is taking place (Oliver, 2011; Selwyn, 2012). I began
to understand that online education is not simply a technical or scientific issue and therefore requires an examination that is of social relevance. As my positivist, scientific paradigm gave way to a decidedly more critical and subjectivist approach, I began navigating through the perplexing arena of qualitative methodology in educational research.

4.1 A brief history of my methodological approaches

Early in this process I came to the conclusion that I needed to employ some sort of personal experience method for my research project because as Clandinin and Connelley (1994) maintain, “to study education is to study experience” (pg. 156). Since starting on this research journey I have examined and become enthusiastic about methodologies that I thought would guide me through this investigation smoothly, but upon further investigation, found that they did not serve the particular purposes of my study. As a result, I designed my research project using one methodological theory, collected my data using another, and then analyzed these data using yet another methodological theory.

4.1.1 Constructivist Grounded Theory

When I initially designed this study for my thesis proposal, it was going to be an exercise in Grounded Theory which is both a method of gathering data and a means by which to generate a substantive theory about the phenomenon that is being observed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Glasner and Strauss (1967) grounded theory can be used when existing theories cannot be applied. This is especially valid if it is a relatively new phenomenon. To this end, I thought that grounded theory would be especially useful for studying the experiences of young mothers engaged in e-learning courses at the high school level as this research has not been explored in the literature. As I delved further into the process of constructing classic grounded theory, I found it to be a deterministic approach to examining a phenomenon and I began to look
at constructivist grounded theory, as put forward by Charmaz (2006). In fact, the questioning guide for my interviews was adapted from Charmaz’s model for research about a life change. Constructivist grounded theory was appealing to me because it requires the researcher to take a reflexive stance towards the research process and consider carefully how their theories evolve (Charmaz, 2006). This means coming to terms with the idea that any analysis is situated in its cultural, temporal and spatial context. I felt that constructivist grounded theory was the perfect bridge between the positivist paradigm that I was moving away from and the more subjectivist stance that I was still reaching for. Charmaz’s methodological approach provided a strong building block for which to write my thesis proposal and I begin to think about collecting data, but as I continued to read further into poststructural theory, I became less and less comfortable with the grounded theory approach. For one thing, a grounded theory study is supposed to use a relatively large sample size in order to actually build a theory from the data (Gibbs, 2011a). While the ideas of Charmaz resonated with me, I still felt like the grounded theory approach with its method of coding and analysis, was still somehow deterministic – still striving for one, true reality that could be known, for once and for all. This did not sit well with my burgeoning subjectivist epistemological stance.

4.1.2 Phenomenology

From grounded theory I became interested in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which is appropriate when you are looking at a particular experiential phenomenon from the perspective of a particular group of people in a particular context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Using IPA made sense to me because I was looking at how a very specific group of learners with a very specific set of circumstances experienced their online courses. I believed that my study was a phenomenological one in other respects as well; it emphasizes the discovery,
description and meaning of a lived experience and emphasizes the world as *lived by a person* and not the world as somehow separate from that person (Laverty, 2003). A phenomenological approach asks, *what is this experience like* (Laverty, 2003)? Phenomenology allows us to, “shatter the taken-for-grantedness of our everyday reality…meet what is utterly strange in what is most familiar. Step back and let things speak to us… a passive receptivity to let the things of the world present themselves in their own terms.” (Van Maanen, 2002 in Friesen, 2009). While I had conceived of my questioning using constructivist grounded theory, the way in which I conducted my interviews followed a phenomenological approach as I began to understand communication not simply as the transmission of information, but shared feeling, a common attunement, or an *intersubjectivity* experienced between those who are communicating. For example, knowing what autumn is does not involve internalizing a discrete set of climate data; it is a series of lived impressions and experiences about the change in seasons that we share with others when we speak of autumn (Smith et al., 2009). I appreciated that member checking and consensus seeking were part of the phenomenological approach and continued along the phenomenological path until reading a poststructural critique of interpretive research that stopped me dead in my tracks. Poststructural feminist criticisms of phenomenological research (Lather, 1993; Strega, 2005) caused me to become very uncomfortable with the idea of conducting an interpretative project; one that acknowledges that the true meaning of a social phenomenon (such as single mothers experiencing e-learning courses) can be discovered with the application of reason. The phenomenological practice of bracketing one’s assumptions and biases in order to be objective seems like kowtowing to positivism. Ultimately, interpretative phenomenology has failed to disrupt the hierarchical dualism established with Enlightenment epistemologies and that advocating for an interpretive theoretical position has served, by its
insistence that qualitative methodologies are equally valuable, to reinforce the dualism that has established them as inferior (Strega, 2005, p. 207). On a more practical level, as an analytical tool, a more hermeneutic type of phenomenological investigation did not fit the data that I had gathered because my findings lacked a strong narrative element. While the conversations that I had with my participants contain thick description, they did not contain the strong anecdotal characteristics needed to conduct a thorough phenomenological investigation. Utilizing phenomenological methodology as a tool to ruminate my interviewing process and to inform the way in which I interacted with my participants was invaluable to my research. Ultimately, I had to abandon phenomenology as an analytic framework because the questions, which were designed using grounded theory as methodology, did not yield data that was conducive to the hermeneutic approach and IPA is inconsistent with my poststructural and constructivist stance.

**4.1.3 Lessons learned**

What I have learned is that there are no smooth journeys in educational research – it is messy business, especially when the aim is to produce a piece of work that is reflexive and critical. Indeed, there is no tightly crafted methodological school of thought that has emerged from critical social research (Gallagher, 2008), and as such, methodologies must instead be adapted to the particular situation. Research in the human [social] sciences needs to be considered “as a series of moments, performances, creative encounters, and temporal relationships that can never be repeated, rather than a series of value-free and distanced observations (Gallagher, 2008, p. 67). Armed with the experiences described above and the desire to avoid reductive empiricism, I have set out a methodological approach that incorporates my theoretical framework of poststructural feminism with social constructivist considerations of language, knowledge and power and the analytical tool of discourse analysis.
4.2 Case Study

“Case study is a strategy for doing research that involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomena within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence” (Robson, 1993 in Gibbs, 2011b). Real life, in this research study does not imply that there is only one knowable reality, but rather refers to the fact that the evidence gathering has taken place naturalistically; within its context (Gerring, 2007). Unlike a laboratory experiment where the subject comes to the researcher, I have gone out to where the phenomenon is happening, which in most cases meant visiting the homes of the women who were the participants in this study. The case study strategy is the preferred methodology when the research is seeking to answer questions of how, when there is little control over the situation being studied and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2003). Investigating the experiences of young mothers taking online courses and examining firstly, how their experiences accord with the hyperbole around online learning and, secondly how the dominant societal discourses regarding online learning manifest themselves in the way these women articulate their experiences fits well with the case study approach.

An important characteristic of the case study is that it relies on multiple sources of evidence (Gerring, 2007; Schwandt, 2007; Yin, 2003). For this investigation I have primarily used interview data, but also have employed some survey data from the wider student population and the Ministry of Education documents that promote online learning to teachers, students and their parents or guardians. This study also takes into consideration the relationship that the women have with their communities and other supports and/or tensions that operate in their lives. Additionally, because the case study is an open, exploratory technique it is useful in
research situations where there is little known about the topic (Yin, 2003). Lastly, the case study is an appropriate methodological approach for my research project because it is inherently iterative, meaning that I have had the ability to constantly modify, adjust, repeat and revisit the data collection and analysis procedures as needed throughout the process (Gibbs, 2011c).

I have conducted this research with a rather specific subset of students taking online, high school, continuing education courses. In this way, I have not chosen to look at what would be considered a typical or average student in the program. This case study represents a single case where I have selected a sample group of students who have some basic commonalities; they have young children, they do not have a partner living with them, and they have not graduated from high school. These specific characteristics that the women all share make them, using Yin’s (2003) terminology, literal replications of each other with respect to the criteria mentioned. Of course each woman has her own particular experience, history and subjectivity, but in spite of these individual differences, by choosing a set of participants who institutionally have had some of the same experiences, I have been able to look at their experiences collectively as representative of a range of typical experiences. The purpose of a case study is to investigate the properties of a single phenomenon and make generalizations about that particular phenomenon (Gerring, 2007; SAGE Publications Ltd & David Byrne, 2009). This is not to say that the purpose of a case study investigation is to universalize; the purpose is not to create universal laws, but to reach some kind of understanding of the particular. Finally, case studies can be particularly useful for research that requires substantial theoretical elaboration (Schwandt, 2007).

4.3 Recruitment of Participants

After obtaining ethics approval from the University of Toronto, I had to secure an additional ethics approval from the particular school board in which the study was taking place.
Because the participants were all over 18 years of age by definition (they were enrolled in an adult education program), the approvals were obtained with relative ease. See appendix G for copy of ethics approval. Participants for this research project were recruited through my existing network of teachers and administrators in the secondary school e-learning program. E-learning teachers were sent an e-mail briefly outlining the purpose and scope of my research and were asked to pass information along to any mothers they may have in their courses. I had planned to send out an e-mail to selected students who were identified by the teachers as possibly interested in the study. Additionally, the lead principal of the e-learning program was sent an e-mail outlining the purpose and scope of the research. See Appendices B, C and D for recruitment e-mails.

How I actually managed to recruit my participants for this project was in fact, a much more informal process than what is laid out here. Two of my four members were students from my own fall e-learning class – a grade 11 social science course. It was while teaching this class, engaging in online meetings with my students that I became aware of two women in particular who were juggling their parental and other household duties with taking my online course. They agreed, in principle, to participate in my research project before I had even formalized my research proposal. Recruitment of the other two members for the study was not that easy. Information e-mails to teachers yielded only one response and my follow up with the student indicated that she was not interested. Recruitment success came when I was granted permission to attend the final exam night at a local high school where students taking courses that had final evaluations that were written in person were there. With the help of the principal and vice-principal of the program, four other women were identified who had children and may be interested. I had a brief, informal conversation with each of the women after their exam to tell
them about my project and their possible involvement. Of those four, two formally agreed to be interviewed. The participants are described on page 61 and 62.

4.4 Interviews

The use of interview as a technique of data collection offered a number of benefits that make it well suited to this study. Lengthy, semi-structured interviews have produced thick descriptions\(^4\) of the participants’ lives and learning situations. Through my questioning and probing, the participants were deliberately encouraged to produce elaborate and detailed answers not only about what their life is like, but what they think about various situations and how they have been able to manage specific events in their lives related to learning online. It is said by some scholars that we live in an interview society (Gibbs, 2011b). In fact, “Interviews pervade and produce our contemporary cultural experience and knowledge of our authentic, personal, private selves” (Silverman, 1993 in Gibbs, 2011a). To this end, I had to keep in mind that the women in this study may have been enculturated into being interviewed and had preconceived notions of how the activity would be conducted. I attempted to create an atmosphere much more conducive to a conversation rather than an interview; I did not use paper or pen, my computer was tucked away, in three of the four interviews I had the participant’s child on my lap for most of the time and, with the participants’ agreement, I simply recorded the interviews on my phone which was very easy to forget about.

As per my particular paradigmatic stance at the time of the interviewing, I employed Seidman's (2012) technique for phenomenological, in-depth interviews which involves using a

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\(^4\) I have used here Geertz’s notion of thick description as described by Denzin, “A thick description … does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard.” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83)
series of three stages. “People’s behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (Seidman, 2012, p. 16) and, as such, require a type of revisiting to the questioning in order to build rapport and dig deeper into their lives. While my intention was to visit each woman three times, instead I conducted one rather long interview with each woman that was conducted in three segments. The first interview segment focused on life history and past experiences with schooling. The questions asked them to reflect mostly on their experiences with and attitudes towards schooling, but other topics included immigration, and their relationships with family and friends. Interviewing in segments, with a beginning a middle and an end, also follows Kathy Charmaz’s (2006) model for conducting informal interviews. The idea is to create an extensive list of questions that may be used for probing purposes, but is not meant to be used as a checklist, where each item must be addressed. Instead, the questions that one asks are tailored specifically to the participant and their situation. The question list provides a guideline of sorts and I referred to my list of questions only to ensure that I covered what I had set out to discuss. In most cases, the conversation took a distinct turn depending on the participant’s own, personal situation and what they wished to discuss with me. The second segment of the interview delved more directly into the participants’ experiences with online learning. I was specifically focused on how learning online was working out for them; were they happy with this mode of learning and was it living up to their expectations; i.e. was it what they expected or desired? In all of the interviews the discussion also turned to questions of social presence and interaction online with other students and the instructor. The last segment of the interview asked the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. The questioning was along the lines of, “if you could offer advice to someone in your situation, what would that advice be?” This interviewing technique is particularly
relevant considering the nature of this study; looking at the lives of mothers taking online courses and looking after young children at the same time. It is crucial that I am able to contextualize their experiences in order to properly explore the possible meanings attached to how the women chose to articulate those experiences. This questioning approach assumes and supports the idea that there are multiple realities, the interview data are co-constructed by the interviewer and the interviewee and that the interviewer is necessarily affected by entering, however incompletely, the participant’s world (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2003). See Appendix E for an outline of the questioning sequence for each interview.

Understandably, I found that I got better at the interviewing process as I practiced more. Again, following Charmaz’s (2006) sage advice, I was careful to ensure that my participants’ comfort level took precedence over my desire to extract juicy data. I often brought some food with me and always presented a small token for the family as a way of expressing my appreciation for their time. Interestingly, the most vivid descriptions and conversations came after the official interview was finished. On two occasions I had to ask the participants if I could turn my recorder on again as they were disclosing information that carried tremendous insight for my study. In both cases, the women agreed, and the conversation continued. In many ways, this phenomenon makes a lot of sense to me as I recall how often I have thought of insightful utterances only after a specific conversation has come to a close. As a result, if ever faced with an interview project again, I will consider building in an opportunity to revisit the participants and ask them about anything else that they have thought about telling me. Seidman's (2012) maintains that interviewers who hope to explore their research topic by conducting a “one-shot” encounter with a participant are “treading on thin contextual ice” (p. 17).
Due to the nature of this research, there was a need for rigorous thought concerning the possible vulnerabilities my participants may have experienced during the interview process. The risks were identified as not physical in nature, but rather there was the possibility of emotional risks, or risk of upset if the line of questioning was not tactful. The most important ethical consideration in my research was the interview portion and I felt that the most important feature of the interview process was ensuring that I maintained a certain quality of relationship with the participants from first contact to the end of the study and beyond. I am still in touch with a couple of the women as they are still taking courses with the adult education program studied in this project.

Once I completed the interviews and transcribed the recordings into text, I proceeded to do a kind of intuitive coding where I attempted to gather together groupings of utterances that were approximately speaking about the same issue and put them together. This process took several weeks and involved numerous readings and re-readings of the interview transcripts. Rather than approaching the interview accounts as potentially true pictures of reality I have tried instead to search for the constructed meanings via the larger cultural discourses embedded in the women’s responses to my questions. I have attempted to group the interview data by emerging themes, examining the discourses around such issues as; motivation, stress, keys to success in online learning and hopes and fears for the future. I have not assigned any numeric value to these utterances or attempted to count the number of times certain words were used, but instead have attempted to group statements and stories together that speak to larger social realities. See below 4.8 Discourse Analysis for a full description of the analytic approach employed.
4.5 School board data

Demographic and attitudinal data were collected by the school board via an online survey that students filled out voluntarily during the final days of their course. See Appendix A for a copy of the survey questions. The collection of these data was problematic because of its voluntary nature; less than half the students in the first trimester of the program filled out the survey.\(^5\) In order to situate my participants within this program, I asked that they share with me their individual responses to these questions. I have chosen data out of the 21 questions that I believe has the most relevance to my study. The initial questions simply serve to support some of the literature regarding who is taking online courses. The other data that I looked at concerned communicating online, comfort with online learning and the importance of social presence and the desire for interaction. These data relate most directly to the nature of this study and serve to situate my case study participants within the larger group of adult students taking online high school courses.

4.6 Ministry of Education and School Board promotional materials

In order to answer one of my key research questions, “How do the prevailing assumptions surrounding the benefits of online learning for young women with children accord with their actual experiences?” it was valuable to conduct an examination of the key texts of published information that have contributed to the aforementioned prevailing assumptions. For this study, I have chosen to limit my investigation to three key pieces of informational and promotional materials; E-Learning Ontario: *The sky is the limit!* Digital education – Kindergarten to Grade 12 brochure, and the local school board’s adult online learning program promotional materials (poster and brochure with identifiers removed). I chose these materials because they

\(^5\) This continuing education program is geared towards students who are over 18 years of age and are not currently enrolled in school. The program is divided into trimesters; each one is approximately 9 weeks in duration.
are of public record and widely available, both on the Internet and in printed format. I regard these materials as informational (they supply information as to how to register for courses and what students will need to consider), but also as advertisements as they follow many of the key tenants of any promotional campaign; they are targeted to a specific audience and utilize evocative imagery and hyperbole to convince the reader of the benefits of the product or service.

4.7 Critical Discourse Analysis

In general terms, discourse analysis is a post cognitive approach to looking at language that sees all forms of communication as *constructing* social life, not reflecting it (Coyle, 2013; Rogers, 2011; Sneider, 2013b). Discourse analysis is an approach to looking at language that moves beyond understandings and experiences and sees language as both social *and* functional. Discourses, for the purposes of this study include all forms of communication and imply commonly accepted knowledge. In an earlier discussion of Foucault (in chapter 2) I explained how concepts and themes around larger societal concerns such as education, criminality, mental health and medicine (to name a few) change over time, and by analyzing what was said and written about these topics during particular historical periods, Foucault was able to see how these discourses shaped wider societal attitudes and political decisions and form regimes of truth. Discourses come from prevailing assumptions, beliefs, background knowledge, and what is regarded as common sense. These statements, in the form of the written word, visual material, verbal utterances and even gestures are then either reinforced back into the prevailing assumptions, beliefs, knowledge and common sense, or serve to challenge them (Sneider, 2013b). The following diagram illustrates the flow of commonly accepted knowledge or truth:
According to Fairclough (2013), the theoretical purpose of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is “to help correct a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance and change of social relations of power” (p. 1). Practically speaking, CDA can elevate consciousness of how the use of language contributes to the domination of some people by others. CDA is concerned with sociolinguistic practices that give rise to contemporary processes of social transformation; e.g. *neoliberalism, globalization, information society, knowledge-based economy* and *learning society* (Fairclough, 2013). CDA allows the researcher to look at how these social changes are reflected in various discourses and how these discourses “internalize and are internalized” (Fairclough, 2013) by other social elements (such as educational policy and young mothers taking online courses).

The feminist poststructural approach to discourse analysis sees that oppressive cultural practices are held in place by a dominant and authoritative system of knowledge or discourses.
that make certain gendered arrangements seem natural and inevitable (Gavey, 2011). This lens also takes into account the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between text, utterances, genres and the discourses that are generated (Fairclough, 2013). Notions of how discourses provide and maintain subject positions (ways of being and understanding ourselves and others) and operations of disciplinary power in promoting self-surveillance and the self-motivation are key analytical themes that I have used in my analysis.

The discourse analysis in this study relies on two types of data, naturally occurring\(^6\) data in the form of Ministry of Education and school board e-learning promotional materials and data that was retrieved for the purposes of this study, interview data and survey data. As artifacts, the e-learning promotional materials have been examined for important, taken-for-granted social constructs and what is generally regarded as common sense or pervasive opinion. For these themes, I have referred to the e-learning mythologies described in the literature review; knowledge economy, technological determinism and any time, anywhere, any body education. The interview data have also been examined for discourses that reflect the mythologies of e-learning, but also I have examined the interview data for other pervasive discourses that have emerged. Using Gee’s (2014) terminology, I have employed big “D” discourse analysis which looks at distinctive ways of speaking and doing that serve to enact specific identities; for example, being a responsible mother or being an “A” student. As per my theoretical framework, Big “D” discourse also implies here the Foucauldian notion of dominant discourses; the regimes of truth that are interwoven into our everyday lives. Under the lens of poststructural feminism, I am uncomfortable with the idea that I am revealing things via this analysis. This perspective privileges me as the person who is more aware than the participants about their situations and

\(^6\) Naturally occurring data is data that would have existed without the research. That is, it is data that has not been generated by the research process.
subjectivities. I prefer the idea that I am problematizing the discourses (López-Bonilla, 2011) that I am using for this study, rather than uncovering some hidden reality within them. Discourse analysis cannot help us know what people think or believe, it can only help us analyze content. Instead, discourse analysis can help us discover how specific actors construct a narrative and how this narrative fits in with wider societal practices (Sneider, 2013a).

4.8 Validity and legitimation

The conditions of the legitimation of knowledge are highly problematic under the lens of poststructuralism. As Strega (2005) points out often we must construct our research in certain ways so that we can obtain approval or funding from various authorities who control access to finances, research participants (via ethics protocols) and the documentation necessary to proceed with research projects. There has been an attempt in qualitative research to somehow reproduce the rigour of quantitative research methodologies. However, if we look at some dictionary definitions of the word valid, it is defined using terms such as objective fact, and accepted authority (Merriam-Webster's, 1993, p. 1304 in Strega, 2005), which are all terms that are under suspicion in poststructural research (Lather, 2012). In fact, it is a basic understanding of this study that one objective truth does not exist and that as a researcher, I construct my own account of reality. This is not to say that because I construct my own version of reality that anything goes, or as Wallace and Louden (1997) put it, “just because a totally aseptic environment is impossible we do not advocate doing surgery in a sewer” (p. 321). The absence of any epistemologically sound way to bracket or eliminate my biases or prior knowledge certainly does not mean that there are no quality assurance mechanisms that can be used to at least attempt to ensure the research has been conducted in a way that produces outcomes that render it worthwhile. Validity and legitimation are still crucial to the research process, but involve
considering alternative articulations of these terms that fit more closely with the paradigmatic framework of critical and poststructural theory (Lather, 2012).

There are a number of quality assurance criteria that present an alternative to the notions of objectivity and authority that I have attempted to include in this research in order for it to be considered legitimate or valid. Firstly, I looked for and considered carefully disconfirming evidence and have been forthcoming about my preconceptions concerning this research. My particular background with online learning makes me especially conflicted about this research; I am a committed e-learning teacher at the secondary level and see many positive aspects of this type of educative technology, while at the same time I am delving into a critical poststructural examination of online learning. I have been very careful to ask questions that do not lead my members into only positive or pejorative remarks about their online learning experiences and I have also endeavoured to ensure that my research representation reflects these disparate views.

Member checking is another way that I have attempted to lend my research some legitimacy. My research participants have had the opportunity to read my representation of their experiences and have ensured that they are accurate and true to the way that they would like their thoughts and feelings to be represented. I submitted the interview text to the participants via e-mail, but received one response saying that, “it looks good to me”. While I have had texting conversations with the other women confirming that they have received the interview texts, they e-mail me with a response, I can only assume that they were at the very least untroubled by my depiction of them in this research.

Perhaps, one of the most important aspects of any research project is its praxis; what, ultimately is the societal usefulness of this research? Poststructural feminist researchers such as Patti Lather (1986, 1993) and Susan Strega (Strega, 2005) argue that praxis is another useful
measure of a research project’s validity; it is what pushes researchers to engage in action-oriented inquiries rather than inquiry that yields no social end. Philosophically, a praxis approach to research means that participants do not have the research done to them, but rather the participants and the researcher have a high degree of intersubjectivity; the research should be mutually beneficial (Tierney & Sallee, 2008). Traditionally, the notion of research as praxis is focused on the emancipatory power of research exemplified by the work of Habermas and Freire. According to Freire, praxis involves a commitment to challenging the status quo, helping people understand their oppression and then arming the participants with the critical tools to transform their lives (Tierney & Sallee, 2008). This is not to say that I regard this research as in any way emancipatory, however, I have been conscious of what Strega (2005) calls, social justice validity; that is, the needs of the community in which the research is taking place is the primary incentive for conducting the research. My main interest in conducting research into the experiences of young mothers taking online courses has always been to expose their situation to those in power in a way that might initiate a change in policy concerning resource allocation for additional supports.

The final measure for validity that I have used is reflexivity; I have endeavoured to consider and come to terms with not only my privilege as a white, middleclass, middle aged non-disabled person, but also to consider my complicity in systems of domination and subordination.

Individual actors within this research study (the young mothers) are located within social settings that are constructed by gender, class, race, age and other characteristics. In fact, the interviews themselves were conducted within a relational context that was filled with social meaning; there is an inherent power dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee. This is further complicated by the fact that two of these young women were my former high school
students. Interpreting the qualitative interview data has required much reflection on the entire research process in order to expose my pre-conceptions about this particular group of participants. Having taught in a Scarborough high school for 11 years has given me some of the background necessary to work with these young women effectively, however I have had to constantly keep in mind that this research is about real people in a real context that can have real consequences; it is not simply an academic exercise.

5.0 Findings

These findings are comprised of survey data from the adult education program in which the women were enrolled, interview transcripts, and informational materials from the Ministry of Education and the school board. As the study is primarily a case of four young mothers taking online courses, it is the interview data that informs this research to a great extent. The interviews were conducted over a period of three weeks during February and March in 2014. One interview was conducted at a local coffee shop of the member’s choosing after her son was dropped off at school. The other women had babies and for comfort and convenience (the weather was terribly cold) chose to be interviewed in their own homes. As I was conducting the interviews I had to constantly take into consideration my role as teacher within the particular program which the women were taking these online courses through, and also consider that I had previously taught two of the members. My position of power as White, middle class, middle-aged teacher had an undeniable impact on how the young women related to me and responded to my prompts. Admittedly, I do not understand what it means to be a mother and a teenager and I wondered about the extent to which they had agency over their decision to become mothers. I made my position clear as a researcher that I was interested in their stories, their words, their opinions and
their ideas; this was a completely judgment free forum to discuss their lives with me, in however much detail they wanted to disclose. While the conversations started out rather stilted and one-side (I asked questions and they answered) it did not take long for the women to become more comfortable and begin to open up, woman-to-woman, mother-to-mother. After all, we shared some basic, fundamental human conditions and although our lives are completely different, we converged, albeit precariously, within the lived experience of womanhood, motherhood and education.

The four young women interviewed for this study were all taking courses offered by their local secondary school board’s adult education program. The courses were offered under a trimester model and run for nine weeks during the academic year (from early September until mid-June). These adult courses are known as hybrid courses because they are not fully asynchronous; students are expected to participate in a number of synchronous, online video conferences with their teacher and other students. Students in these hybrid online courses are also expected to participate in a mandatory meet the teacher night at a local high school in order to establish a rapport with the teacher and other support staff. Many of the courses also require a face-to-face written exam at the end of the trimester.

5.1 School board data from adult online education program

Below are selected pieces of demographic and survey data from the adult online program’s online survey. About half of the students taking the hybrid online courses filled out the survey, but the results give a general idea of the population and how the young women in this study fit into this larger population.
5.1.1 Gender

The pie graph reflects the literature which says that women are the primary users of online education (Kelland, 2011; Kramarae, 2001; Selwyn, 2011). In this respect, the women in my study are typical of the students enrolled in these particular online courses.

5.1.2 Children

Again, I have used these data to situate my participants within the wider group of adults enrolled in the program. I sense that the four people who answered yes to this question were my four participants as they assured me that they had completed the survey. In this regard, their situations were very unusual within the wider group of people over the age of 18 completing their high school education. At the same time, I know that there are more people with children taking these courses because I met them. It makes me question the accuracy and, ultimately, the utility of these results.

5.1.3. Have high school diploma from Ontario

I used these data to illustrate that the courses are being accessed in order to achieve a high school diploma and not for other purposes, for example, upgrading entrance qualifications
for postsecondary school. None of the women in this study had achieved their secondary school diploma and were, therefore, typical of the rest of the student population.

5.1.4 I believe that I can fit school work into my schedule

A majority of students agreed with this statement, however, two of my participants answered *sometimes* indicating that they were not certain about their ability to fit school work into their schedule. This is supported by the interview data as well as the literature which points to a distinct set of challenges encountered by mothers as they attempt to study online (Kelland, 2011; Kramarae, 2001; Zembylas, 2008).

5.1.5 Communicating with teacher

While the overall student population who answered this question was quite split on their desire to communicate with their teacher in a multi-modal fashion, all four of my participants expressed a desire to have multiple forms of communication with the teacher. There is additional discussion of this notion below in the interview data analysis.
5.1.5 Participating in group projects

This datum is one of the most interesting for me because participants’ responses represent a divergence from the attitudes of most of the other high school students enrolled in the program. Generally speaking, many students do not wish to take part in group-projects or have much contact with other students in their courses. The reluctance to collaborate online is supported by anecdotal information that I have gathered from five years as a high school e-learning teacher and from being active in the e-learning K-12 community. This reluctance to participate in group activities online contradicts much of the literature which supports social presence as an integral part of online learning (see Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010; Lee, 2014; Oztok & Brett, 2011; Rourke & Kanuka, 2009). Interestingly, three out of the four participants interviewed were adamant about the need for social interaction online and their desire for some sort of enhanced ability to communicate with other students either via chat window or a Facebook-like wall.

5.2 Ministry of Education and school board promotional materials

The materials below represent a small selection of the promotional materials used by the provincial education ministry and the local school board to promote e-learning to students,
parents and teachers. As per Gee’s (2011, 2014) interpretations of discourse analysis, discourse is not just found in text, but is visual as well. In fact, discourse is not limited to one or two senses, but is truly multi-modal. For the purposes of this study, however, I have examined some of the imagery and words used in the promotional materials to make claims about the role of e-learning in our education system.

5.2.1 E-learning Ontario: “The Sky is the Limit!”

Discourses of inclusivity, flexibility, and individual achievement predominate the e-learning literature at a provincial level. **Image 1:** The cover of the brochure is dominated by a group of joyful (and rather mature) looking students jumping for joy against a clear blue sky; diplomas in their hands, mortarboards tossed high in their air. The models used in this photograph are very attractive (by most social and cultural standards) and are implied to represent the diversity of e-learning students. The message is very clearly one of satisfaction and success via e-learning. **Image 2:** This is Ontario’s e-learning strategy. Using photography that perhaps conjures the Canadian native peoples population, emphasizes equal opportunity, regardless of “location, ability, and circumstance”. This is a direct nod to the notion of *anytime, anywhere* learning. While a noble thought, the reality of bringing quality educational programs to Canada’s First Nation’s People who are generally relegated to frequently abysmal conditions in the far North is much different. For example, see the following excerpt described in a pan-Canadian Survey of e-learning for Aboriginal high school students (Sharpe, Philpott, & Bourgeois, 2011):

*There are still significant impediments to First Nation’s ability to take full advantage of the benefits of information technology, including: 1. Lack of public access sites on reserves; 2. A relatively small number of homes with internet connections; 3. A lack of culturally relevant content; 4. Lower than
average literacy rates, and; 5. A lack of computer skills and socially relevant Internet training programs (p. 17).

This study suggests that perhaps e-learning programs in aboriginal communities may not be as beneficial as this promotional material suggests, speaking to the massive systemic changes required to decolonize the existing curricula, let alone taking it online, making it accessible, and providing the human and physical resources necessary to implement. Images 3 and 4 from the same e-learning Ontario brochure, speak to the inherent benefits of online learning for teachers and students. Using words like flexibility, enhance, and high-quality, the brochure incorporates very clear neoliberal, individualistic ideals through a discourse of providing all individuals with skills, competencies and aptitudes to thrive in the new globalized economy and the need for immaterial labour; self-directed, self-disciplined, routinized workers (Selwyn, 2013). Image 4 is text that promotes digital education to teachers; engage and support students, differentiate instruction, enhance learning and track students. All these descriptors speak to the notion that online learning can somehow facilitate better teaching practices, reflecting a deterministic approach to technology, that it is the driver of educational change (Friesen, 2009; Oliver, 2011; Selwyn, 2013). Sharing expertise with colleagues across the province provides an urgent reminder that as teachers that they had better start using online learning practices or they will be left behind.
### Image 1

**The sky is the limit!**

Digital education
Kindergarten to Grade 12

### Image 2

ONTARIO'S E-LEARNING STRATEGY

Education and student success are top priorities for the Government of Ontario. Access to high-quality digital support through e-Learning Ontario is key to ensuring that all students succeed, regardless of their location, abilities or circumstances.

### Image 3

**MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNERS**

E-Learning Ontario gives learners the flexibility they need to succeed. It gives secondary students more learning opportunities while they work towards graduation. And it can help elementary students improve their oral, reading, writing and math skills.

Among other things, learners can:
- Access a wide variety of high-quality online courses including videos, activities, maps and interactive multimedia.
- Recover course credits they need for graduation.
- Access digital learning resources anywhere, anytime.
- Reduce timetabled conflicts.
- Practise new skills online and prepare for tests and exams.
- Enhance their knowledge of and comfort with digital tools.

The provincial Learning Management System (LMS) allows teachers to interact with their students and monitor their progress as they work through online credit courses developed by qualified Ontario teachers.

### Image 4:

**MORE OPTIONS FOR TEACHERS**

E-Learning Ontario allows teachers to better engage and support students learning and share their expertise with colleagues across Ontario through the provincial Learning Management System (LMS) and the Ontario Educational Resource Bank (OERB).

Teachers can:
- Differentiate their instruction to meet individual student needs.
- Access thousands of digital learning resources.
- Refer students to relevant digital learning resources.
- Capitalize on the knowledge and expertise of their provincial colleagues.
- Track student progress at any time.
- Enhance their educational and technology skills.

Help with teacher training and professional development is available through e-Learning Ontario’s face-to-face and online sessions.

In addition, teachers can share insights and effective practices on e-Learning through the e-Community Ontario website.
5.2.3 School board promotional materials

At the school board level, promotional materials are more geared to the students and their parents or guardians, as such, they contain less words and more imagery. The text in the school board materials is fairly pragmatic and contains instructions requiring students to consider carefully if they are suited to online learning. For example, in the adult e-learning program, the brochure asks students to consider if they are motivated to work independently and within a few credits of achieving their high school diploma (See Image 3). In this respect, the text in the school board materials do not allude to the fact that e-learning is for everybody. In fact, the text in Images 3 and 4 is quite emphatic about what is expected from the e-learning student at this particular level and what they can expect from the course; i.e. they have to log in every day, they must attend face-to-face meetings both in person and online and they need to provide official transcripts. The notion of flexibility is promised in Image 1, but there are many requirements that must be met, making the courses not very flexible and rather exclusionary, clearly indicating that the program is not for people who need a lot of credits. Neoliberal discourses of self-motivation, responsibility and individual choice are strongly represented in the school board brochure. Implied in the text is a strong sense of individualism and self-determination and the notion that progress can be individually driven through technology as long as you are willing to make the most of the opportunity that is being afforded to you. The choice of photography for the adult e-learning program brochure (see Images 1 and 2) paints a very different picture from the reality of studying online as an adult who is not in school. By using photographs of happy, good looking young people who appear to come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the promotional materials give the erroneous impression that online learning is somehow a collaborative pursuit. While there are accounts in the literature of students collaborating with their face-to-face day-
school classmates for assistance with their e-learning classes (for example, Barbour et al., 2012), online learning at the adult level is predominately a solitary activity that results in feelings of loneliness and isolation, particularly among women who are bound to the home with young children (Kramarae, 2001; Sharpe et al., 2011; Smith & Jeffery, 2013; Zambrana-Ortiz, 2011; Zembylas, 2008).

**Image 1**

**What is the e-Credit Course Program?**
The e-Credit Course Program offers online courses for mature students (18+) no longer attending school, who require a flexible learning opportunity and an age-appropriate setting to support and enhance their learning experience.

**Image 2**

**Do you need more credits to graduate?**
Earning credits online may be an option for you!

**Image 3**

**Do any of the following apply to you?**
- willing and self-motivated to make the most of the opportunity to earn credits in an online environment
- within a few credits of earning your diploma (only need a few more credits)
- out of school and now recognize the importance of having an Ontario Secondary School Diploma

**Image 4**

**What are the Requirements?**
Students must:
- provide an official transcript
- meet the necessary prerequisites for course eligibility
- attend a face-to-face orientation session for enrolment
- complete a supervised final exam (course dependent)
- login regularly (daily)
- meet teacher on a regular basis via web conferencing
5.3 Interview Data

I have attempted to group the interview data together thematically by what I have understood as the dominant discourses that have emerged in the text, understanding, of course, that there are no clear boundaries between these discourses and that they can overlap, split apart and meld together (Gee, 2014). Woven throughout the interview conversations is the widespread presence of pertinent discourses that illustrate the internal regulatory nature of neoliberalism. Thematically, the woman all express some version of the idea that they alone are responsible for their own success or failures and this success or failure is a matter of choice. The women also express a strong desire towards self-improvement, self-motivation and transformation and understand these qualities as a matter of individual choice and responsibility. The section on the realities of e-learning speaks to the lack of connection between what they thought e-learning was going to be like and the reality of taking the courses. Many of the realities the women speak of contradict many of the societal mythologies regarding online learning and educational technology in general.

5.3.1 Overview of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Living arrangements</th>
<th>Courses needed to graduate</th>
<th>Other summary information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Lives on her own with infant son.</td>
<td>Has two e-learning credits, but no other Canadian credits assessed.</td>
<td>Immigrated from the U.S. with her mother in 2010.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samira</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Shares an apartment with her two children, her sister and her sister’s three children.</td>
<td>Has met the basic requirements, but would like to upgrade. Does not have a high school diploma.</td>
<td>Came to Canada as a refugee via Kenya Had her daughter when she was 25.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 Pseudonym
8 Age at time of interview
Natasha 19  Lives with her parents and her infant son. 14 – has completed one online course. Immigrated 6 1/2 years ago from Israel.

Sara 27  Lives with her parents, mother and father. Her father is ill with a chronic condition. Her adult brother also lives with them. Has just completed the last course – took seven online courses in order to complete diploma requirements. Family is from Syria Had her son when she was 19.

5.3.2 The Decision to learn online

Taking high school courses online through the local school board represents for these women one of the only options for them to accomplish their educational goals. Margaret talked about how a social worker approached her in the hospital right after she had her baby, “when I had my baby a social worker in the hospital, she was asking me if I had finished and I said not yet. I still had a lot of courses … and she was telling me about, you know, online school.” Similarly, Sara was approached by her social worker about finishing high school and the opportunity for a second chance at achieving a high school diploma, “I was on social assistance and they told me that you can start to attend school [online] and I said sure and I took the opportunity of it. They gave me a second chance and I just did it. I went for it.” The decision to take online courses to finish high school was presented to them as the only viable way to accomplish their goal of graduating from high school while still being able to care for their children. Samira sums up nicely the decision to take courses online:

I was thinking about going into night school, but I was thinking about who was going to watch my kids at night? So, that was a no. Then I was thinking about day school and I’m thinking still about my kids, who would watch them during the day? The daycares are expensive and I can’t afford the daycare, so even I applied for the subsidy, I’m still on the waiting list and the waiting list takes forever. So, I looked at a couple of online options.
5.3.3 Past experience with schooling

Despite the differences in the women’s backgrounds, they all had previous negative experiences with secondary school as a commonality. All of the women expressed some sort of shame or regret for not attending school, but had extremely complex reasons and circumstances for not doing so. For example, Samira, who came to Canada as a refugee, describes how high school was an alienating experience for her in Canada:

*The reason I left high school before completing all the courses I need, I wasn’t feeling comfortable studying in a young kids’ school…I was already almost 18 when I went in [to high school in Canada] and even when I reached 18 I was still there and the way I think and the young kids, we were always clashing. Like, I will have argument with young kids in the labs, so I didn’t like that feeling.*

*I came to Canada as a refugee. Yes, so, when I came to Canada I had studied in Kenya. I did some schooling, but, my life over there wasn’t, how can I say it, o.k., my life, because I lost my parents at really young age, so I was raised by someone else and I had to work for my living. So, when I came to Canada it was something else. I got the chance to be full time student and to school – experience what I missed in most of my life. But, I felt like an adult, more than the kids that were there.*

Margaret described feeling like she was not getting enough attention from the teachers and that the classes were too large. “*…class ratio children to teacher was so big, you didn’t get one-on-one attention from your teacher at all, I mean she’s trying to school, like, 30, 40 kids in one classroom it’s kind of hard.*” Natasha expressed a similar situation with her experiences in school, “*There were too many people, it was too many people and the teachers weren’t paying attention to everybody and I didn’t like it.*”
As a result of these experiences, all four of the women were not motivated to go to school; high school was not a place where they experienced success, belonging or happiness. None of the women interviewed were active in any extra curricular activities and they all look back at their high school experiences as primarily negative or at least not where they wanted to be at the time.

*So, it wasn’t really good because some days, I really didn’t want to go to school. I want to go to school, but thinking about how I’d been treated with the students, I wouldn’t want to wake up and go to school.* (Samira)

*I really, like, didn’t like school. My passion was not there.* (Sara)

*I wasn’t going to classes, I wasn’t doing anything, yeah. It was really hard to attend school. The courses themselves weren’t that hard, but attendance, the due dates, it was too much. So, I wasn’t really going to school.* (Natasha)

*...when we started to get into middle school there were more influences, everybody's ditching school, everybody's trying to fit in... trying to be cool. Grades starting dropping...* (Margaret)

The women did have a desire to complete high school, but the school system did not appear to accommodate their needs. Margaret, who was from the U.S., did not have Canadian citizenship and could not attend high school and went to work instead – she was 15 at the time:

*I was just straight to work. It was easier for me. When I moved to Canada first I only came as a visitor because my mom is a Canadian right, so she ... I’m technically eligible for my citizenship, but I have to wait up to, like, almost a year for it.*

Natasha felt so behind in her classes because of the lack of attention to English language learning in the early grades when she came to Canada that by middle school it felt impossible to catch up:
...because they were talking about things that they learned in grade 7 and 8 and I don’t know those stuff...like in math, I don’t have the basics, I have until grade 6 and everything. I was a good student in Israel and then here, in grade 7, the teacher, the math teacher only helped me, so this was the only course that I had a bit, but I wasn’t, like, I had no base, I haven’t even done grade 10 math even.

Sara expressed deep regret and even shame for not finishing high school.

Again, I was young and I wasn’t thinking in the future basically, so umm... It wasn’t really smart of what I did. So, just dropping out is not the right thing to do.

When I reminded her that I was not there to judge her actions, Sara replied:

Actually, you know what it is? Truly I shouldn’t have [dropped out of school] because now, I’m suffering now than I did before, so I see it that way.

Not finishing high school was not a conscious decision for any of the women; it was more a result of how they chose to cope with what seemed at the time an unbearable situation. Natasha articulates that she is not sure why she has ended up without a high school diploma, “I don’t have friends who don’t go to school. I don’t know why I decided to go out on this path.”

5.3.4 Discourses of female responsibility; thinking about the future

The four women seemed very conscious of the lack of opportunity available to them if they did not obtain a high school diploma and felt that not obtaining this basic educational requirement would result in being unsuccessful; not getting a job, not having a career, and possible worse fates. Natasha explained:

I don’t know, like, because, I’m not going to have a future if I don’t even finish high school, so it’s the basics that I can do, and then if I want, and I do want
go to college or university, but the high school it’s the basic of the basic. Like, almost every job, like, asks for high school and I don’t have it.

Sara felt that the availability of online courses high school courses has provided her with an opportunity to get on with her life, “...it kind of really pushed me into a different direction, you know, be successful, don’t, you know, go down the drain, try to step up more.” There was also a strong sense among the women of wanting to improve the situation for their children. The women felt that having a baby had made them more mature and more focused on their futures.

Going back to high school and obtaining a diploma is seen as a way of securing a better future for their children. Samira talked about wanting to set an example for her children:

\[I\text{ think, yes, I’m more focused and more ambitious. It’s all because I want a better life for them. It’s not about me anymore; it’s all about them now. So, I’m trying my best to be that ‘A’ student so even in the future I can tell my children, you know I was an ‘A’ student, I would love you guys to be ‘A’ students too. And study hard, work towards your goal and your future. So I want to be a good influence on my kids.}\]

Sara explained how the future mattered to her now:

\[So, it’s like a staircase to me, I learn little by little and I just took the chance to do it. Now it’s really important. Now I think future, I think, you know, this is what I want to become, this is what my son should become, this is what we should do in the future...\]

The desire to finish high school and graduate with a diploma has become much more important for these women since having children. There is a certain sense of pride and even desperation about the need to ‘finish’ or ‘get it over with’. As Sara said:
I was, like, o.k. maybe I’ll think about it and, like, I ended up taking a course. I mean yeah... I do really want to finish [high school], I do really want to get it over with. It’s stressful, right.... [not having a diploma]

I just want to have something on my wall with my name that I know that I suffered for and I did it on my own. So, it’s something that I really... it just out of the blue just pushed me to doing it.

There was also the appeal of being able to direct their own learning, which acted as a motivating factor for the women. All of the women talked about the fact that they had chosen to do the courses and having the power of choice was a contributing factor to their success. Part of this motivation is being interested in the subject matter, as Margaret articulates, “I mean if you don’t want to do that course, trust me you’re not going to finish it.” And Sara, “…the courses were interesting because I decided to take them myself.”

5.3.5 Discourses of female self-reliance; it’s all up to you!

The women all identified factors for success in completing the online courses as being an individual endeavour. The women all identified being organized as the most important factor, but also having determination and not giving up and not making excuses were also seen as important.

5.3.5.1 Importance of being organized

These young women have been thrust into a situation where they are responsible for, not only organizing their own lives, but their children as well. They are grappling with new motherhood and trying to take online courses at the same time. The women with babies seem to emphasize the organizational aspect of online learning being a crucial factor.

I would say organizing your time. Number one. Because if I wasn’t organizing my time the way I am, I don’t think I would have had the time to go do any of
the assignments and I would have been always late on handing them in…As I said, before, just be organized. If you are organized you will get through it so easily (Samira).

…but routine, routine it has to be a routine for you. If it’s not a routine, it’s not something, like, you can pop in a do every once in a while. It’s something that has to be done, you know what I mean, on a routine basis. Waking up, getting coffee, checking, doing an assignment, going to work, coming back, getting back on has to be a routine somehow, you have to incorporate it into a routine, if not, you are going to go crazy. You are going to go crazy, yes, because assignment dates are going to come up, you haven’t studied, you haven’t read the, you know, you’re behind two or three, you gotta catch up, you gotta go back, you haven’t connected with the [online] meetings. It will be really hard (Margaret).

Margaret went so far as to say that it was her lack of organization due to a recent move that contributed to having to drop out of a course.

That’s what I found just happened in my last course. I didn’t have any really routine set there because I did just move. So, setting up new house, apartment, getting my child back on a schedule. It was too much. I couldn’t even get him on a schedule. He’s always awake. You know, and if everything’s so unpredictable for me, I couldn’t put myself on a routine. I couldn’t do it.

5.3.5.2 There are no excuses for giving up

From the discussion about factors contributing to success in online learning, there was a distinct discourse of self-reliance and not giving up. The women all believed that having children was no excuse for not being able to complete a course and that hard work and determination were extremely important. While they, without a doubt, understood how having small children to look after is a serious hindrance on their ability to concentrate on academic work, the participants
were all quick to articulate their contention that having children was not to be used as a “crutch”. Samira contended that, “…we always have to challenge ourselves and not use kids as an excuse because kids can never be an excuse for everything. As long as you want it, you can do it.”

In response to being asked whether she thought that it was important for her online instructor to know that she was a mother of a small child, Margaret says, “I just don’t want to come out to someone and be, like, oh, hey, I’m a mom too, you know what I mean? Some women will use that as a crutch to not do their assignments.” Sara, who has a multitude of familial responsibilities on top of her school-age son, was adamant that having a child should not be an excuse:

I think every single thing has its own time and I don’t think that anyone should have an excuse and say, o.k., I can’t do it because of my child, I can’t do it because of my family, I can’t do it because of this... no, there’s time for every single thing. So I think if someone is doing it with a child I’ve done it and I even have a sick father, so on top of all of that and I have my whole family to take care of; so on top of all that, I still managed.

Sara expressed a great deal of pride in her accomplishments because achieving her education was something that she did “on her own”. Sara said, “Yeah, like, I'm getting the hang of it, I'm continuing... I'm doing it with my own time, my own sweat, my own brain, everything is my own.”

5.3.6 The realities of learning online

One of the major touch points during these interviews was a discussion about how their online course experience compared with what they thought online learning was going to be like. Some of these experiences were directly contradictory to the rhetoric put forward in some of the e-learning promotional materials examined earlier in this chapter, while other experiences were
unanticipated complications of studying while looking after small children. All four of the participants had a lot to say on this topic therefore the discussion is broken down into a few different areas; number of students in their classes, course load and level, when they do school work, and concerns with the courses themselves.

5.3.6.1 Feeling like a number

Contrary to the claims of providing differentiated instruction to meet individual student needs, all of the women seemed to be concerned about the initial number of students in each class. They felt that they might have been more successful or had a better experience if the teachers knew who they were and were able to give them more individual attention. This begins with the online orientation activities, usually in the form of a discussion posting where each student is expected to provide a short biography and then respond to a few others in the class. Samira, for example, felt overwhelmed with the number of posts.

I honestly tried the introduction page. I tried to read who they are, but I ended up giving up because in the [general social science] class we were [social science one students] and [social science two] altogether – 60 students or so. So every day you’ll come and there’s a new post...

Margaret expressed concern that with all those students, it is very difficult for the teacher to keep straight the particular circumstances of each student, “It would be helpful if the teachers would take the answers into consideration. It’s hard though because if they also have, like, 30, 40 kids in a class, you’re really not going to remember who has a kid, right?”

Margaret also talked about how it would be beneficial if the teachers knew their students a bit better, but she felt that the interaction was very impersonal.
You’re just getting what you see through a text or sometimes an [online]
meeting and that’s not very much you know, because it’s kind of general and
it’s stated for everyone, so it’s a little bit harder. It’s not really a personal
touch you’re just kinda like a number, you know, you’re just there, you’re just
doing your work.

5.3.6.2 Anytime, anywhere, anyplace?

When asked what they thought was different from their expectations of online learning
compared with the reality, all of the women said that they thought that it would be more flexible;
that they would be able to complete assignments and hand them in on their own time and not
have stringent due dates. When asked of what she thought online learning courses were going to
be like, Natasha replied, “Actually, I thought that there’s not going to be a time limit, you can
just... let’s just say that the course starts today and ends in three months, so you have three
months to do everything.”

Margaret also thought that there would be more flexibility with due dates. Before taking
online courses with the school board in this study, she did some research into some other
methods of obtaining high school credits through an independent learning center.

*I thought it was more flexible. It really... I mean... I don’t know if it’s just [this
school board] or..., cause I don’t know I haven’t tried any other online school,
but it’s not really as flexible as they market it to be. It’s a little bit more, like,
the assignment due dates, I noticed, like, with another online school, it’s more
like on your pace so that you could take two weeks up to nine weeks to
complete a course... The timing [with these courses], it wasn’t really flexible
because I didn't know the assignment due dates were so crazy. I didn't know
that.*
The lack of flexibility in due dates was not regarded as negative by all of the women. Samira, for example, felt that the strict deadlines in one of her courses helped her stay on track and ultimately lead to less stress.

...and [the teacher] was strict about deadlines. Which was really nice because you will try your best to finish your work on time so that you can get extra time to study later on and do other stuff that you really have to do.

Samira then went onto say that, “[the] teachers were understanding and also the time line and the content that they gave us to cover in that period of time was fair enough, it wasn’t overload...” Even though the timing of the deadlines for assignments was not as flexible as the women had initially thought it would be, the course load and work assigned was not too much according to Samira.

A couple of the women expressed dismay at having to show up, in person at a face-to-face meeting with their teacher at the beginning of the course. The expectation was that they could be at home to do the course, and the meeting with teacher, although deemed valuable in many respects, seemed outside their imagined concept of what an online course would be.

Natasha, who enjoyed the anonymity of online learning was quite surprised and rather dismayed at having to go to an in person orientation, “I didn’t go to the orientation face-to-face and I’d rather not. I saw that and I was just, like, it’s not what I imagined...”. Margaret describes what a waste of time and effort she thought that her face-to-face meeting was:

I met her, it was really brief. I walked in and I honestly came from the west end all the way there and to just wave hi, and she was, like, “hi, bye” and that was, like, goodness, I'm not coming back again [laughs]. It's so hard for me cause now I have to find a baby sitter. That's even going to be more hectic for me find a baby sitter, get some money, I have to go all the way down there, come all the
way back, you know. So hopefully, I can be, like, look, I came already four times, I'm a real person, I don't want to come back anymore. If we could just meet in Skype or Adobe Connect…

5.3.6.3 Dealing with interruptions and working into the night

The women had different strategies for getting their schoolwork done. Margaret tried to fit her work into her day in small stretches while her son was in the high chair eating breakfast, or playing on the floor. But she generally found this very distracting as there was always something pulling her attention away from her schoolwork.

...kids get sick, they don't feel well, kids hurt themselves, they bang their head, you gotta get up, they scrape their knee. So, things happen, so I mean you do have to get up and tend to them and you may have to walk away from the computer for a little while, so it does get distracting. That's what I'm saying.

Samira and Natasha both did the bulk of their schoolwork at night after their kids were asleep. While this meant that they could to their work in relative peace and quiet, I wondered about how much sleep they got themselves, especially at the end of the trimester when multiple assignments were due.

Sara’s complex home life which involves caring for her entire family meant that she had to fit her schoolwork into her day somehow; even if it meant working in the hospital while she was with her father.

Oh, I had, like, when my dad was in the hospital. I had to literally take my computer, literally connect to my phone in the Internet because the hospital’s Internet was a disaster. But, yeah, I had to always do that, take my computer and just do my courses at the hospital. It was really hard 'cause I had to stop, do my dad, stop, do this...
This discussion made me consider if these women got to enjoy any time to themselves. Between responsibilities for their children and other household duties, any spare time they had was taken up with their courses. Studies examining women’s experiences taking postsecondary courses online concur that a supportive home environment is a key factor to academic success (Kelland, 2011; Kramarae, 2001; Lawlor, 2013; Zembylas, 2008). As single mothers, the women in this study have very little support in their homes and, consequently, are solely responsible for not only the care of their children, but also other household duties as well.

5.3.6.4 It’s going to take a long time to graduate

Three of the four women interviewed needed a considerable number of credits in order to graduate – given that these courses were offered in nine-week trimesters, taking only one course per session would mean a maximum of three courses during the school year as the adult program did not run in the summer (at the time of this research). For some of the women, the idea of taking high school courses for three or four years was difficult to imagine, so they tried to take two courses in one session in order to accelerate their progress towards achieving a high school diploma. Sara recalled her first few online courses:

Actually, the first time that I started, I said, I’m going to take two courses at time ’cause I really wanted to finish. ’Cause I really want to attend my college on whatever I want to become and ummm... and the first time I took it was English and Math which was really easy for me so I was really happy. I passed both. And the second time I did Family Studies and ummm.... what was it called.... [Geography]...which was really, like, it was a struggle for me ’cause it was really hard, but I still passed through and umm... Then I said in the summer school I’m taking Health. I said that I’m just going to take one course at a time I can’t handle two courses anymore... it was really hard.
Even Samira who seemed to be the most receptive to the strict deadlines in some of the courses said, “Taking a second course felt like taking six courses, so... it was like having six courses, but I still had to try and manage my time.” As a result, the women were all in agreement that taking more than one course at a time was too stressful and that they would just stick with one course per session, even if it meant delaying their completion date.

5.3.6.5 Disappointment and boredom

Some of the women expressed some misgivings about the courses that they were taking in terms of the content and their level of engagement. Margaret was really looking forward to one of her social science\textsuperscript{9} courses because it was of particular personal interest to her, but found that the static read-only contact could not hold her interest:

\begin{quote}
I really looked forward to the [social sciences course], but actually when I got it, I was, like, no. What is this? For me, I’m a person who needs to be challenged a little bit more. So, having something that was a little bit predictable and just reading it, I felt like I was back in middle school and I didn’t like it... A lot of reading material, like, the content section would be, like, 6, 7, 8, 9 pages of just text...
\end{quote}

Samira noted that very few people would show up for the online, synchronous meetings for one of her courses and she surmised that this was due to the fact that there was very little to discuss that was of any interest to the students.

\begin{quote}
...no one would show up sometimes into the [online] class. Maybe because [social science] was all about reading and everyone was o.k., this is easy, we can just read the notes and we’ll understanding what it’s all about...
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{9} “Social Sciences” is a generalized term used to include a number of different courses that were taken. The actual course name is irrelevant to the study and may serve to identify the teacher and/or students involved.
When asked if her course was interesting, Natasha was concerned about missing and old content.

*It was interesting, but there were stuff that weren’t... half of the stuff there was a link to [a video], but it didn’t work. Yeah, so because it’s old information and most of the links in the course didn’t work. And I don’t care about the links in the end of the course, the related links, but it’s the ones that say click here and read this information and then answer the questions in the content -- answer them or do something with this information, but I couldn’t, like, find it.*

### 5.3.6.6 Sources of stress

For all of the women, the sources of stress seemed to come from trying to juggle their duties as mothers and having assignments and homework to finish. Samira, who has two small children, talked about trying to meet with one of her teachers online in the evening while her son wanted her attention:

*Sometimes I’ll be having [an online] class with [my teacher] and [my infant son] will be awake still, some days, and he wants to breastfeed. Imagine you’re opening your laptop, he’s jumping on me, he wants to touch stuff on the laptop and he’s on the breast too and I’m trying to reply or ask a question and sometimes I will be asking myself too, why am I stressing myself, like, why shouldn’t I just wait until the baby grows enough?*

Sara talked about trying to manage the responsibilities of looking after her sick father, managing her parents’ appointments, caring for her school-aged soon and somehow trying to fit in her own school work.

*I’m the baby of house, so I do everything; paper work, doctor appointments, taking them out, like, I do everything. I’m the driver, I’m the organizer, everything for them, so... It’s really stressful. A family, it’s a lot.*
For Margaret, stress seemed to occur when too many responsibilities would pile up; schoolwork, house cleaning, looking after her son – and then something else could happen like her son gets sick or she herself is not feeling well.

*Stressful for me is a day where I can’t get much done. It’s a day where my son will end up a little bit more clingy than usual and I have an assignment and I really need the free time to, you know, work on my computer. That’s stressful for me and I get a little bit irritated. What’s stressful? A dirty house. I can’t concentrate if my house is dirty and then I have work to do, it’s just doing too much. Another stressful thing is assignments running into each other. I came down with something really bad and I swear I was gonna die, but, I ended up contacted [my teacher] and letting him know. I’m almost a week behind on assignments, I’m sick, my child is sick and is there any way I can catch up because I knew that the deadlines are already past and...*

At the same time, Margaret was also quite adamant about the use of daycare. While she admitted that having some sort of formal daycare would allow her more time to pursue her education, it was expensive and she was somehow philosophically adverse to the idea of having her child looked after by someone else. She uses the verb *throw* and refers to a friend disparagingly, saying that her baby would be okay with *anybody.*

*I’m trying to avoid daycare. It’s really expensive and it’s putting him into a daycare. My friend threw her baby in a day care and the baby’s kind of undetached from her. You could drop the baby off anywhere and the baby’d be, like, o.k. with anybody. My baby is not, you know, I can’t take him to anybody’s house and I leave him he’d probably cry. I’m trying to avoid that... He’s so little.*
5.3.7 Social connections and support systems

5.3.7.1 Feelings of isolation

Along with the perceived time flexibility of online learning, many adult learners who have familial commitments such as young children to look after are attracted to e-learning courses because they do not have to leave the house. While this represents a considerable advantage for women who have infants and children who are not yet in school, learning in an exclusively independent online environment can lead to feelings of isolation and a lack of motivation (Kelland, 2011; Kramarae, 2001; Lawlor, 2013; K. M. Smith & Jeffery, 2013). While Natasha was adamant that she had no interest in collaborating with other students, “... I didn’t like being in school and all those stuffs [sic], so... it’s comfortable being on my own and working on my own...” other women talked about the desire to do group work and feel more connected with other students in the class. Samira is the most forthcoming with her expression of the isolation that she feels as a single mother taking courses online. In the interview she actually used the word lonely to describe the way she feels sometimes.

I would, like, if maybe each class if they made just one assignment we can say a group assignment where we can contact or put us in groups maybe... and get to know each other even more by doing that assignment because if we spend, like, two days communicating back and forth maybe or through video or if we decided to exchange phone numbers, we get to know the other person even more...For those who are new into [Canadian] education system who decided to go into online straight away maybe, so for them, it would have been really nice to learn about group work.

Margaret talked about the absence of group assignments and a lack of connection as being a factor in her dropping her online courses:
There was no, like, group assignments or was no, like, interaction. There was nothing there to keep me motivated to keep me to keep logging in every day and I kind of slowly drifted off. So I thought oh no, I didn’t even complete the courses... I just left them.

Sara discussed the desire to get together for occasional meetings with students in her online courses:

... but, even, like, once a week or once every two weeks a meeting together at a school or at a place where you can meet your students and, like, just talk about the work... that would be nice... the thing is that you get to know your classmates, you get to speak to them more. You’d probably make a friend there.

The women in this study, for the most part, desired a more collaborative online learning environment, either by meeting in person or participating in some group activities online. Neil Selwyn (2013) maintains that digital technology and online learning in particular, frame education as a competitive process and that there is very little opportunity for true group behavior and a resulting decrease in obligation to others. The overall diminished sense of solidarity and togetherness experienced by these women studying online further isolated them from their peers and, in some cases, the lack of interaction led to them abandoning their courses altogether.

5.3.7.2 Social presence, online identity and cultural concerns; wither digital democracy?

While the students interviewed expressed an interest in getting to know other students and collaborating a bit more, there was some hesitation at the idea of putting too much detail about their identities up in their online profiles. The profile page gives students an opportunity to post a photo of themselves and provide some basic personal information about their likes and interests.
Samira was very interested in the profile pages for the courses that she was taking, but found that “when I clicked some of the students and no one posted anything, I said why should I post mine? Maybe no one will even want to know who I am.” This lack of interest in the profile page and blank profiles led Samira to abandon the idea of putting her personal information out there for the class to see. As a Muslim woman, Samira was also concerned that perhaps some women may have a problem posting a photograph of themselves to an online course, “coming from my religion, many Muslim women would oppose the idea of posting their pictures, so I don’t think it's going to be that easy, yeah. But, they could show their kids picture, maybe, it's something about them.” Interestingly, Samira also talked about a student in her course who had attempted to contact her and she felt that she had been contacted on the basis of her Islamic last name, “I assume from her name she was Muslim too. So maybe she was more comfortable contacting me because of my name.” Other students were adamant that they did not want to put their photo in their online learning profile. Natasha said, “I don’t want to put a face to it, because I didn’t go to the orientation face-to-face and I’d rather not [have people know who I am]...it was just, like, it’s not what I imagined... I have a picture on Facebook, but I’m not going to put my picture in a course.” At the same time, all of the students agreed that a Facebook-type wall on the homepage of the course would be very helpful for communicating quickly with other students – without having to drill down to the discussions which are buried several clicks away from the homepage and generally not well attended unless they are being evaluated. Natasha said,

I actually thought about that, not e-mailing each other, but if there was, like, a wall, yeah...You can go on it separately and you can see if somebody needs help... they, like, message, they can put it on the wall...if it’s just a simple question, they can just post it and somebody can answer and help them... this is actually comfortable...”
Interestingly, Margaret was concerned that the course material may be too difficult for the *immigrants*. Her assumption is that many of the students in her online course are immigrants because that is something that she knows about Canada and she sees the names of the students who are in the course and they sound like they are from *someplace else*.

*Way harder, well, not way harder. It’s a little more challenging. I mean it’s kind of easy because in Canada there’s way too many immigrants so the work has to be kinda understandable for a lot of people who don’t understand you know what I mean. They don’t speak the language properly and they have to read it, you know. For me, like, I get it.*

The women have demonstrated that socially, they felt quite detached from the other students in the course and that there was no clear understanding of who is in their classes and how to communicate with them in any meaningful or productive way. I asked Margaret if she had ever contacted another student in the class to ask for help and she said:

*One contacted me before, but by the time I got her message it was… By the time I see her message it was a few days old and I was, like, o.k., she’s probably got it already, but no, I haven’t done that yet. I barely realized we could even e-mail, I didn’t even know we could e-mail each other.*

While online communication is regarded as much more open and democratic, removing discrimination and providing a non-hierarchical environment, in fact, students interviewed for this study found that any communication that does happen outside of the course is based on racial and cultural presumptions from superficial knowledge of the Other.

### 5.3.7.3 Teacher contact and support

The participants all discussed the importance of ongoing communication with their teachers. Because there was not much contact with other students in the class, questions about
assignments and other points of clarification were obtained exclusively through teacher contact.

The nature of this hybrid learning course meant that there were to be ongoing, frequently scheduled online meetings using a video camera and microphone. Due to the varied schedules of adult learners, ideally the online meetings would be scheduled into a variety of time slots during the week in order to accommodate every student. Samira said, “... with [one course], we would meet twice a week. Like, on Mondays around 3:30 and then on Thursday at around 9:00, so it was a really good planning for those people who couldn’t meet during the early one, on Mondays they can meet the second session maybe.” Other teachers held their online meetings during static times that did not correspond with the students’ schedule and they could not attend. Some teachers did not have online sessions at all. Natasha said:

“[They] didn’t do any...[they] did one, the exam review, but I forgot to log in and then [the teacher] told me that nobody showed up. And actually I thought that they were going to record everything, but nobody showed up, so... and then I... there was the one in the beginning, the orientation, and... there weren’t anything in between.”

Natasha felt that the “chatting was unnecessary”, but liked the recorded online meetings she had for explanations and instructions for assignments. Samira had a much better experience with the online meetings and found that “...it felt like one-on-one because sometimes I would be the only one maybe on line. And no one will be there so the teacher would be just talking to me...” For the most part, the women felt that the teachers were responsive to their questions by e-mail and available for help. Samira said, “the teachers were really friendly and nice from day one they told us that they were there for us 24/7 so we can always e-mail them with any question, whether we are stuck and also before they give us a due date, most of the teachers will sit with us and discuss the assignment, which was really nice.”
5.3.4 Concluding remarks concerning the interview data

I would like to reiterate that, for the most part, the women had a great deal of positive remarks about their teachers and the administrative support that they received from the e-learning program. Sara, who had just finished her last high school credit, was the most vocal with her praise for the teachers and the program in general:

...like, I absolutely have no, like, bad, how can I tell you... no negative things to say about the e-learning because every teacher that I've had they've helped. Like, whether it's through a phone, whether it's Adobe Connect, whether, whatever it is, e-mail, like, they've always helped and replied back to whatever question I've answered clearly to me which is... it helped, it helped.

My interest with this interview data focuses particularly on the discourses of individual responsibility and the way in which societal mythologies have permeated views of educational technology and, hence, I fear that I have dwelt on the negative. It is interesting to note that many of the teachers have also internalized the regulatory nature of neoliberal ideals and have made themselves available to students on a continuous and immediate basis. The impact of online learning on teacher practice, however, is another discussion altogether.

6.0 Discussion

As I read the interview data numerous times, it occurred to me that despite the strong differences in each woman’s background and experiences, there were a number of areas in which the data converged. I felt that exploring these convergences would provide some insight into how these women’s experiences illustrate some of the major themes in the literature. More specifically, how do the words of these women act to embody the dominant discourses about online learning and defy them at the same time? The findings of this study point to four insights
that are of significance to online learning at the secondary school, adult learning level; (1) they show that single mothers who are taking e-learning courses face significant challenges (realities) that are not necessarily evident when they enroll; (2) these women are motivated to take online courses by wider societal attitudes and truths and these dominant societal discourses have been internalized and operate through the women who are taking these courses, and; (3) the support systems in place, both online and face-to-face, are not sufficient for these women to accomplish their goals without creating significant stressors and tensions in these women’s personal lives; and that (4) online learning represents for these women an education of last resort in that there is no other practical way for them to obtain their secondary school diplomas at this point in their lives with the resources that are available to them.

6.1 The unanticipated challenges of learning online; not what they expected

The research findings provided evidence that the women’s expectations for what e-learning was going to be like did not fully accord with the realities of their experiences. In fact, to some extent the courses were quite the opposite of what they expected. For example, all of the women stated that they thought the courses were going to be much more flexible, allowing for alternative due dates and the ability for them to do lots of work when they were able to find the time; anywhere, any time learning was rhetoric that did not translate into reality for these women. In fact, the nature of these online courses mirrors the pace and instruction of a face-to-face class, imposing strict deadlines with an expectation that all students in the course be working at relatively the same pace. While studies with K-12 students in online environments are fairly uncommon, the literature concurs that secondary school students are attracted to online learning by the flexibility of time and place (Barbour et al., 2012; Barbour, 2013; Churchill, 2010). As mothers at home looking after young children, the flexibility of e-learning courses is a
key factor in their decision to learn in this manner (see also Kelland, 2011; Kramarae, 2001; Lawlor, 2013; Rousseau, 2012; Zembylas, 2008). In addition to the strict deadlines, which to be fair, some students found helpful, the courses that these mothers were taking required them to attend, in person, a ‘meet the teacher’ information session at a local high school and an in-person final examination. Both of these face-to-face components, although clearly outlined in the course literature, were not anticipated, nor easily facilitated by the women who had to travel considerable distances and hire baby-sitters for their children in order to attend.

The women also spoke of large class sizes and ‘feeling like a number’ which was not anticipated when they signed up for the courses. One of the key promotional features of e-learning at the K-12 level is the opportunity for differentiated instruction in order to meet individual student needs (E-learning Ontario, 2012; Ontario Public School Boards Association, 2013). The enormous class sizes and, in some cases, double classes meant that the students interviewed for this research did not feel they received adequate individual attention, at least in the beginning of the courses. Lack of attention and one-on-one is a factor that can lead to higher attrition and lack of student success (Churchill, 2010). It should be noted that when the women did experience one-on-one attention, there was much more satisfaction with the courses and the quality of their learning experience.

Along with large class sizes and, often, a lack of individual attention, the women also expressed some disappointment and boredom with courses. While the women were mostly able to push through the disappointment, some experienced course links that did not work and lack of engaging content which led to a lack of success (see also Gilmore & Warren, 2007; MacFadden, 2007; Shen, Wang, & Shen, 2009; Zembylas, 2008). E-learning emphasizes self-selected engagement and choice and, in this way, it is easy to choose to disengage online. Less successful
and disengaged students are very easy to ignore in an online environment – they simply just disappear.

As illustrated in chapter 4, much of the promotional material around online learning uses images of young people working collaboratively and enjoying e-learning as a social function. So too, the mythology that describes our online presences as disembodied and free from the traditional encumbrances of race, gender and class pervades notions of the benefits of learning in online environments (Hughes, 2007; Lawlor, 2013; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). The reality that women in this study experienced was much different from these mythologies. In fact, the women desired more social interaction online than they were receiving and spoke to a distinct lack of group work as being both a deterrent and a disappointment to them leading, in some cases, to a lack of engagement (See also Rourke & Kanuka, 2009; Snyder, 2009 and others).

6.2 Neoliberal metanarratives: discourses of responsibility, self reliance and self control

Neoliberalism with its heightened emphasis on individuated personhood has resulted in a set of discourses that pervaded the Ministry of Education’s promotional material and the interview data gathered from speaking to young mothers taking online courses. The emphasis on individualistic values such as responsibility, self reliance and self control are predominate in online learning despite evidence of the importance of social structures on overall life chances (Baker, 2009). E-learning is presented to students and teachers as a way of achieving individual progress via technology. It also increases the responsibility of the individual in terms of educational choices and emphasizes the notion of individual responsibility for the consequences of these educational choices (Selwyn, 2013). With stunning uniformity, the women in this study clearly iterated the idea that they were agents of their own success or failure with respect to their education, and by extension, their overall life situations. They also expressed very strong opinions about the
importance of reinvention of self-motivation, stating that now they were concerned about the future in general, but especially concerned about the future for their children. As educational priorities shift away from citizenship and engagement with democracy to individual pragmatism and acquiring the skills necessary for economic success, the imperative for lifelong learning becomes ever more pronounced (K. M. Smith & Jeffery, 2013).

A strong belief in the power of consumer choice was expressed by the women in this study; the ability to choose their courses was seen as motivating and even empowering. Sara and Margaret were particularly vocal about the power of choice in their motivations saying that they were interested in the courses because they were able to choose them. In this way, enrolling in online courses has become a type of consumption of a consumer good, extending notions of self-responsibility with explicit belief in consumer choice and market freedom as the key to individual success (Baker, 2009; Neil Selwyn, 2013; K.M. Smith & Jeffery, 2013).

The women exhibited a very strong sense of responsibility to the needs of their children and, as single parents they have very few people in their lives on which they can rely. A vastly inadequate publicly funded childcare system has meant that the women have had to deal with the stress of their heavy workloads with individual solutions rather than through social programs (see also Kelland, 2011; Kramarae, 2001; Zembylas, 2008). At the same time, the women unanimously expressed very strong opinions concerning the idea that having children should not be seen as an excuse for not completing assignments or dropping out. The women used phrases such as; not use kids as an excuse; some women will use [having children] as a crutch to not do their assignments; I’m doing it on my own time, my own sweat, my own brain, it is clear the women have a very strong sense of responsibility. The regulatory function of neoliberalism is
overtly demonstrated in the women’s reluctance to lay any blame or ask for any other authority to share in the responsibility for the care of their children and the betterment of their lives.

“… neoliberalism has a regulatory function whereby seductive but deceptive authority is folded into the subject and the existence of external obstacles denied. Thus, the neo-liberal subject – taken to be freed from the traditional ties of class, gender and race – is wholly selfproduced and the agent of their own success or failure, and this is to be understood through discourses of choice and free will. In this way, neo-liberalism produces selfgoverning citizens who are ‘obliged to be free’ and who regulate themselves without the need for overt forms of state control” (Rose, 1996 in Baker, 2009, p. 277).

The women’s strongly expressed need to improve themselves, look to the future and set a good example for their children can be seen as stoicism and determination, however they are also strongly suggestive of the neoliberal imperative for autonomy, adaptability, constant reinvention and self improvement.

6.3 Lack of support; the stressors and tensions learning at home

While the women, for the most part, had a little help with the care of their children from friends or family members, it was clear that the brunt of their childcare and accompanying stress was solely their responsibility. The women talked about having to juggle a lot of other responsibilities in some cases. Sara, for example, was charged with organizing all of her extended family’s appointments and financial affairs as well as caring for her own school-aged son and completing her online courses. Samira talked about having her infant son on her lap breastfeeding while she was trying to participate in one of the online meetings for her course. Margaret talked about being sick and unable to do any work, having housework pile up and not being able to properly take care of her son while doing school work as an enormous source of stress. Some of the women even talked specifically about feeling isolated or even lonely in their
online courses and desired some contact with other students and mothers in particular. What was made abundantly clear from this study was the fact that taking online courses represented the only feasible way for these women to continue their education. Margaret described the frustration at trying to obtain childcare assistance in order to have some time to catch up with her homework. She was told that taking a course online meant that she did not need childcare, she would have to prove that she needed to be somewhere other than her home in order to qualify for some assistance. Lone parent high school programs that provide daycare for children while parents are in school are few and far between. To this date, the Ontario Ministry of Education is piloting a Single Parent Initiative that would provide face-to-face classroom instruction for single parents and onsite daycare and nutrition for their children. This programming, while promising, is only available in six school boards on a limited scale; one or two schools per board. With few other social support systems in place, taking online courses to finish high school is the only viable option for single mothers with small children and in this regard, it can be viewed as the education of last resort.

### 7.0 Conclusions and Areas for Further Study

Early, and especially sole, motherhood is commonly regarded as a social problem and threat centering on the notion of promiscuity and dependency on the state (Baker, 2009; Ferguson, 2013; Miller, 2011). As a result, there is persistent societal and moral stigma associated with it and, often, outright vilification of young, single mothers. Despite this stigmatization and vilification, the women in this study expressed very clear discourses of self-determination, self-motivation and responsibility; not only wanting to improve their lives, but concerned about the future for their children and wanting to set a good example for them. Using
a critical and poststructural approach has allowed me to explore how the pervasive mythology and societal discourses concerning the efficacy of online learning has framed it as a way to achieve academic and life goals anytime and anywhere, via a wholly democratic forum. By providing an alluring solution to educational gaps, e-learning is presented as the ideal means by which to achieve neoliberal imperatives of lifelong learning and self-improvement. Bringing learning into the home by providing Internet-based courses can certainly provide single mothers with educational opportunities they would not have otherwise, however it cannot be regarded as a panacea.

There is no denying that online learning courses can provide increased and improved educational opportunities for those who are educationally disadvantaged. This includes adult students who must work, single parents, and other people who are not able to attend face-to-face courses because of physical limitations, incarceration, or other institutional barriers (Kramarae, 2001). There are also numerous pedagogical advantages to online learning. For example, students who are unsure of themselves and less likely to participate in a face-to-face class have the time to carefully compose responses in asynchronous discussions. Additionally, the flexibility of the online classroom can contribute to a “queered” classroom whereby the absence of the body can invoke an ambiguity that allows for thoughtful and unselfconscious reflection on such issues as class, race, gender, and sexuality (Stern, 2011). As education becomes increasingly more commodified under neoliberal government policies and as cuts to funding and privatization of certain aspects of the education system become more prevalent, e-learning is regarded as a common sense technological solution to the problem of affordable, accessible education. While we need to acknowledge that there are deficiencies in online education, we also need to keep in mind that for an increasing number of students, the choice is not between face-to-
face and online, but between online education and no formal education at all (Bray, 2006). As such, my hope is that this research and other studies like it may push education policy-makers to consider developing online learning skills as an adjunct to the education system and not merely as an efficiency measure so that we may begin to regard online learning and its technologies, not as inevitable, but as just another other tool that, with sufficient supports, can mediate an action.

**Areas for further study:**

It was only after I had completed the interviews and was looking at the data that I noticed a distinct absence in the dialogue of the loss of freedom, and in particular, the impact of having children on their social lives. As single women with very few social supports, I am left wondering when they have time to be young women; two of them were still teenagers at the time of this study, the same age as my own daughter whom I think of as a child. None of the women uttered the word *sacrifice* in their conversations with me. While they discussed some of the challenges they were experiencing, never once did they talk about missing their friends or the prospect of going out by themselves (without their children). I regret not discussing how having children has changed them; not just as students, but as young women.

Although e-learning has been regarded as less emotional, very impersonal and lacking the emotional richness of face-to-face learning, emotions have a great impact on how students learn in online environments. Studies of online learning environments have described how several positive emotions; enthusiasm, excitement, pride, intimacy or trust and also negative emotions; frustration, boredom, alienation and isolation can have an impact on learning (Gilmore & Warren, 2007; MacFadden, 2007; Zembylas, 2008). While the women did talk about stress, boredom and isolation, I did not focus particularly on how these emotions affected their ability to learn online.
This study did not look at any online discourses, and although there was some discussion about online identity in terms of how they constructed their own identities and how they regarded the Other online. Social presence and online discussions was very limited in the courses that the women were taking with discussion posts comprising of perfunctory submissions that answered a particular question or provided a response. Interaction with Others was very limited. Further study needs to examine the way in which students present themselves online and the way in which they interact with Others. Levinas uses the term *the face* to describe the true nature of the Other. In this way, it is the face-to-face proximity of our interactions that creates the condition for our ethical responsibility to the Other (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) argue that in online learning we still have a face-to-face relationship with the Other, but this relationship is through an *interface*; that which comes between various faces and who or what is *out there* (p. 68).

My desire is that this research illustrates that there is much to be gained by examining the experiences of students learning in online environments. As educative technologies such as those employed in e-learning become more ubiquitous, I would hope that we will continue to scrutinize, debate and carefully consider the broad range of implications such pedagogical approaches may have on teaching and learning.
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Appendix A: Student Online Survey

Student Survey

Thank you for participating in this short survey. Collecting information from our students allows us to make the delivery of courses better. The information you provide us helps to ensure that new initiatives, are improved to meet the needs of students. Your information will remain confidential and will not be shared with other students.

1. My school board is:
   Mark only one oval.
   ○ (School Board name removed)

2. My course is:
   Please enter grade, course name, or course code

   ......................................................................................................................

About Me

3. 1. My age is
   Mark only one oval.
   ○ Under 18
   ○ 18
   ○ 19
   ○ 20
   ○ 21-25
   ○ 26-30
   ○ 31-35
   ○ 36-40
   ○ Over 40

4. 2. My gender is
   Mark only one oval.
   ○ Female
   ○ Male
   ○ Other
5. **3. I am**  
   Mark only one oval.  
   - Married/Living Common-law  
   - Separated/Divorced  
   - Single  
   - Skip this question  

6. **4. I have children**  
   Mark only one oval.  
   - Yes  
   - No  

7. **5. My primary source of income comes from**  
   Mark only one oval.  
   - Full time employment  
   - Part time employment  
   - Personal savings  
   - Parents or family  
   - 'Second Career' grant  
   - Ontario Works  
   - WSIB/injured worker  
   - Skip this question  

8. **6. I have lived in Canada for**  
   Mark only one oval.  
   - I was born in Canada  
   - Under 1 year  
   - Between 1 and 3 years  
   - Between 3 and 5 years  
   - More than 5 years
9. **This is the language or the languages I usually speak at home: (you may select more than one)**

Choose all that apply  
*Check all that apply.*

- [ ] English
- [ ] French
- [ ] Arabic
- [ ] Cantonese
- [ ] Cree
- [ ] Dari
- [ ] Farsi
- [ ] Gujarati
- [ ] Mandarin
- [ ] Ojibwe
- [ ] Other Native languages
- [ ] Russian
- [ ] Spanish
- [ ] Tagalog
- [ ] Tamil
- [ ] Urdu
- [ ] Other: .................................................................

**Section 2: Education Background**

10. **The last course I enrolled in was**

*Mark only one oval.*

- [ ] Less than 6 months ago  
- [ ] 6 months to 1 year ago  
- [ ] 1 to 3 years ago  
- [ ] 3 to 5 years ago  
- [ ] More than 5 years ago

11. **I have a high school diploma from an Ontario high school/secondary school:**

*Mark only one oval.*

- [ ] Yes  
- [ ] No
12. **10. Completing this course will allow me to graduate**  
*Mark only one oval.*
- Yes
- No- I need to take more courses to graduate
- No- I don't need to get my Ontario high school diploma

13. **11. My highest level of education from a school in CANADA is:**  
*Mark only one oval.*
- Some high school
- Graduated high school
- Some college
- Some university
- Graduated university
- Apprenticeship courses in training
- This is my first course in Canada

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**Section 3: Where I Took My Courses**

14. **12. I have completed high school, college, or university courses from OUTSIDE Canada**  
*Mark only one oval.*
- Yes
- No- all my education has been IN Canada

15. **13. My highest level of education from OUTSIDE Canada is**  
*Mark only one oval.*
- DOES NOT APPLY TO ME
- Some high school outside Canada
- Graduated from high school outside Canada
- Apprenticeship courses outside Canada
- Some post-secondary (college, university) outside Canada
- Graduated from college outside Canada
- Graduated from university outside Canada
16. **14. Most of my schooling completed OUTSIDE Canada was in:**
   
   *Mark only one oval.*
   
   - DOES NOT APPLY TO ME
   - Afghanistan
   - Africa
   - China
   - Ethiopia
   - Haiti
   - India
   - Iraq
   - Iran
   - Jamaica
   - Korea
   - Pakistan
   - Philippines
   - Russia
   - Somalia
   - Sri Lanka
   - United States
   - Vietnam
   - Other:
     
     """

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**Section 4: Using Technology**

17. **15. I have taken online courses before**

   *Mark only one oval.*

   - Yes
   - No

18. **16. I have taken courses in distance education that were not online courses (e.g. through the mail, booklets or workbooks, audio/video cassettes, CD Rom)**

   *Mark only one oval.*

   - Yes
   - No
16. **14. Most of my schooling completed OUTSIDE Canada was in:**
   
   *Mark only one oval.*
   
   - DOES NOT APPLY TO ME
   - Afghanistan
   - Africa
   - China
   - Ethiopia
   - Haiti
   - India
   - Iraq
   - Iran
   - Jamaica
   - Korea
   - Pakistan
   - Philippines
   - Russia
   - Somalia
   - Sri Lanka
   - United States
   - Vietnam
   - Other:

   ........................................................................................................................................

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**Section 4: Using Technology**

17. **15. I have taken online courses before**
   
   *Mark only one oval.*
   
   - Yes
   - No

18. **16. I have taken courses in distance education that were not online courses (e.g. through the mail, booklets or workbooks, audio/video cassettes, CD Rom)**
   
   *Mark only one oval.*
   
   - Yes
   - No
19. **Technology and my school work:**
Please share with us if you agree or disagree with the following statements. Select one bubble in each ROW.
*Mark only one oval per row.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am comfortable using a computer in my personal life</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am comfortable using a computer for my school work</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that I can fit work into my schedule</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel confident that I will do well in this course</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Section 5: Communication**

20. **Communicating with my teacher:**
Please share with us if you agree or disagree with the following statements. Select one bubble in each ROW.
*Mark only one oval per row.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I only READ the teacher’s comments that are written on my work</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like to SPEAK with my teacher about my work (in-class/adobe connect or on the phone)</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like to EMAIL my teacher about my work</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like to communicate with my teacher in a VARIETY of ways (in-class/adobe connect, phone, email)</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
<td>![ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
21. **Communicating with other students:**
Please share with us if you agree or disagree with the following statements. Select one bubble in each ROW.

*Mark only one oval per row.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel comfortable around other students.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel comfortable asking another student for help.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think communicating with other students makes my work better.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like to take part in study groups or group projects.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Section 6: Getting Help**

22. **If I have a problem with my school work I would probably:** (you can choose more than one answer)

*Check all that apply.*

- [ ] Go to my teacher for help
- [ ] Go to another student for help
- [ ] Ask about tutoring through the school
- [ ] Ask a family member or friend for help
- [ ] I don't know who I would ask for help with my school work

**Section 7: My Next Steps**
23. **21. After completing this course I plan to: (you can choose more than one answer)**

Choose all that apply.

*Check all that apply.*

☐ Apply/attend college

☐ Apply/attend university

☐ Begin apprenticeship training

☐ Start my own business

☐ Take more high school/secondary courses

☐ Unsure

☐ Other: ...........................................................................................................
Appendix B: Information E-mail to Students

Hi there!

My name is Maria Weber and I am a student at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) at the University of Toronto. I am also a social sciences teacher with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and have taught e-learning courses as well.

I am doing some research on what it’s like to take online courses and be the mom of small children at the same time. This research will involve talking to me about your experiences – that’s it!

There’s no pressure here at all. If you are interested in talking to me about what it’s like to be a mom while you’re studying online, then please drop me a line at maria.weber@mail.utoronto.ca and I will send you some more information about this project.

Thanks for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Maria
Appendix C: Information E-mail to Online Teacher

Greetings fellow e-learning teachers

As some of you already know, I’m at OISE this year aiming to complete the research for my MA thesis. I am conducting research into the experiences of students taking adult education online courses. Specifically, I’m looking to speak to any moms who are taking courses as my research involves looking at their experiences in the online environment.

If you know of any students in your courses that might be interested, I’d really appreciate if you could pass on my contact information: maria.weber@mail.utoronto.ca.

If your students ask, the research itself will consist of a couple of interviews that will be held at their discretion. The interviews will be more accurately guided discussions where they will have the opportunity to talk to me about how their courses are going and what types of challenges they are typically faced with.

Thanks for your support.

Maria
Appendix D: Information E-mail to E-learning Lead Principal

Hi [principal’s name]

As you already know, I’m at OISE this year aiming to complete the research for my MA thesis. I am conducting research into the experiences of students taking adult education online courses. Specifically, I’m looking to speak to any mothers who are taking courses as my research involves looking at their experiences in the online environment.

I will be collecting data from the adult online program in a couple of ways; the results from the Student Online Survey and a series of semi-structured interviews with women who have volunteered to take part in the study. The interviews will be more accurately guided discussions where the participants will have the opportunity to talk to me about how their courses are going and what types of challenges they typically face. Ideally I would like to conduct interviews a couple of times during the course of the trimester. The timing and duration of these interviews will be at the discretion of the participants.

I have attached a copy of the approved Information Letter and Informed Consent for your perusal. All participants will have the opportunity to withdraw from the study whenever they wish and their data (interview transcripts) will be destroyed. I also wanted to make it clear that course specifics and teachers will not be identified and any information that could be linked to a participant will be altered and/or made anonymous. In fact, the TDSB itself will not be identified, but simply referred to as “an urban Canadian school board”.

Thanks for your ongoing support. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Best regards

Maria
Appendix E Guiding Interview Questions

Please note that these questions are meant to guide the discussion. Other questions may be included as necessary in order to probe for further descriptions from the participants.

Introductory Questions

1. Tell me about the online courses you are taking or have taken in the past.
   Probing:
   a. Describe your past experiences with schooling: Did you like school? What were your favourite subjects? What sorts of extracurricular activities did you enjoy?
   b. What type of student would you say that you were before you had children? Can you describe the person you were then?
   c. What was going on in your life before the baby? Who were/are the people who influence you the most?
   d. What kinds of options were you presented with regarding pursuing your education while looking after a small child?
   e. What sort of support have you been given since you had the baby (family, friends, community)?
   f. What contributed to your decision to take an online course?

Intermediate Questions

1. Tell me how your online course is going.
   Probing:
   a. Can you describe a typical day for me? How does this change if you have several assignments due?
   b. Can you describe your childcare situation for me? Do you have help to care for your children if you are very busy with your course(s)?
   c. If you are unsure about how to do an assignment in our course, what do you do? What would you like to be able to do? Do you feel like you are getting enough academic support?
   d. Tell me about what you find stressful? How do you cope with this stress?
   e. Describe a “good” day to me. Now, describe what a “bad” day might look like?

Concluding Questions

1. What do think are the most important factors in being successful as an online student? How did you discover these factors?
   Probing:
   a. Do you think that you have changed as a student since having your baby?
   b. Have your views on stress and how to manage your stress changed since our last interview?
   c. What did you think of your course? What (if anything) did you find interesting about the course content?
   d. What sorts of instructional strategies did you feel were effective? Which ones didn’t work for you?
   e. How much time did you spend per day on your course(s).
f. Think back to your expectations about e-learning, how did this experience compare with what you thought it was going to be like?

g. After taking this course, what advice would you give someone who was taking an online course for the first time – especially if they had small children to look after?

h. Is there anything that you think is important about online learning that we have neglected to talk about?

i. Is there anything about my research that you would like to ask me about?
Appendix F: Student Participant Information Letter and Informed Consent

M. Weber
OISE/UT
252 Bloor Street West, Toronto

Dear [participant name]

First of all, thank you so much for considering participation in my research project. I really appreciate it!

I have been a social sciences and geography teacher with the TDSB for 11 years. This year I am studying at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and working towards my Masters degree. For about five years I have been teaching online courses with the TDSB’s e-learning department, in summer school, day school and, most recently, with the e-credit 18+ program. Because of this, some of you may be former students of mine. I also want you to know that I may be professionally acquainted with some of your teachers.

I’m conducting this research as part of my Masters thesis at OISE. I am interested in looking at how young mothers experience online courses – especially high school courses. I think this is an important area for study because online learning is growing really fast in Ontario, but we don’t know much about what the students actually think about it and whether it is working for them or not. Talking to moms is extra important because you are taking these courses with the added responsibility of looking after your children. It must be a lot to juggle in your lives and I would like to take a closer look at how you manage the stress of taking courses online and looking after children at the same time.

My hope is that we can meet a few times, at your discretion, either online via Adobe Connect, on the phone, or in person to discuss your experiences taking online courses. Ideally, I would like to talk to you three times, with each interview taking about one hour. I realize that you are a very busy person, so I will leave the scheduling entirely up to you. Below is an outline of how I would like to collect my data.

1. I will be looking at the online survey that all students complete as part of your course. I would like to understand how you fit into the overall student population who is taking the e-credit 18+ courses.
2. I would like to interview you in person at least once, but ideally three times regarding your experiences. If meeting in person is an issue, we can always talk on the telephone or talk via Adobe Connect.
3. I will be recording these interviews for the purposes of transcribing them (typing them into words).

The information you provide will be used in my Master’s thesis to describe more fully how students experience online learning on a day-to-day basis. I will also be looking at how your experiences compare with how online learning is represented in the current academic literature. Your descriptions will provide a real life context for this topic. By talking to you about your experiences with e-learning, I am hoping that I can provide some insight into the design and delivery of e learning courses for adult learners talking secondary school courses.
Confidentiality
Your name and the subject that you are taking will remain completely anonymous in this study. I will not mention you by name, nor will I refer to the course that you are taking, that way, neither your or your teacher can be identified in this research. Additionally, I will be changing details of your situation to further disguise your identity; for example, if you have a boy, I may say that you have a girl. I will also change other details that I will discuss directly with you. Audio recordings of the interviews will be stored in an encrypted folder on my personal computer hard drive until they are transcribed. Once the interviews are transcribed, the audio recordings will be deleted permanently. Transcribed interviews (text) will be kept in an encrypted USB stick and will be backed up in an encrypted folder on my personal desktop computer for the duration of my thesis work and then five years thereafter, whereupon the data will be deleted. When it’s finished, my thesis will be openly available for free digital download from the University of Toronto’s online repository, T-Space. Also, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics (ethics.review@utoronto.ca, 416 946 3273) if you have questions about your rights as a participant.

If you have any further questions, you can contact me by phone: 416-831-8826 or by email at:
You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Professor Clare Brett by email at clare.brett@utoronto.ca

Signature:

Please understand that you may withdraw from this study any time you like without providing a reason, by contacting me at maria.weber@utoronto.ca or by calling or texting me at 416-831-8826.

I would also like you to understand that your decision to participate or not has no bearing whatsoever on your marks in this class (or any other class) and that our discussion will be held in the strictest of confidence. Under no circumstances will I be sharing any of what we discuss with anyone else. This information is between you and me.

By signing this, you agree to allow your online data and interview responses to be used as part of the research described above. You understand that these data will be used anonymously and that your identity will be disguised.

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Signature: __________________________________________________________
Appendix G: Ethics Approval Letter

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 29801

January 21, 2014

Dr. M. Clare Brett
DEPT OF CURRICULUM, TEACHING &
LEARNING
OISE/UT

Ms. Maria Weber
DEPT OF CURRICULUM, TEACHING &
LEARNING
OISE/UT

Dear Dr. Brett and Ms. Maria Weber,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, “Diapers and downloads: How young mothers negotiate the pressures of finishing their secondary school education online”

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: January 21, 2014
Expiry Date: January 20, 2015
Continuing Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB's delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.
REB Chair

Dean Sharpe
REB Manager

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