The Master’s Tools: Critical Adult Learning in a Web-based Adult Education Course  
Budd L. Hall and Maria Turner

It was the late Audre Lorde who said that, “The master’s tools will never be used to dismantle the master’s house” (1970) in reference to the importance of critical feminist scholars working from new frameworks and in new ways. This paper explores challenges and opportunities for critical adult learning within a framework of web-based adult education instruction. This paper reports in a dialogic manner on the experiences of two experienced and critical adult educators. One adult educator was an instructor and the other was a participant in a web-based on-line adult education course during the months of September – December, 2000. The paper responds to some of the following questions: How are relations of power between the instructor and the participants facilitated or challenged? What are the limits or opportunities for challenging or problematizing learning related to issues such as gender, race, class or sexuality? What is the nature of the learning community or communities created within the context of an on-line course? If a goal of critical adult education is to problematize existing power relations in adult learning contexts, to what degree does the on-line course make this more likely, less likely or about the same? What changes might be made in course software such as Web Knowledge Forum to make it more supportive of critical adult learning possibilities?

The course under examination is a foundational course at a major Ontario university. The teaching of this course on-line in September of 2000 marked the first time that the course had been offered in a distance mode. The course was supported within a WebKF framework in which has been based on a metaphor of how a scholarly community ideally works. Students were located between Manitoba and Nova Scotia, with most of them in Ontario outside of Toronto. This research builds on the Davie et al paper entitled “Universities, Communities, and Site Building: Exploring Three Online Learning Systems (Virtual University, WebKF and Mookti)”.

The paper is further informed by theories and models of web course management as elaborated in the Bruce Mann edited volume coming out of Memorial University experience and reporting on experience in Canada, the United States and Australia.

On-line learners are typically part-time learners. Part-time learners are an interesting group to begin with because they fit formal academic studies into already full lives. While graduate studies demand commitment at the best of times, the commitments required of part-time learners is enormous. Sustaining interest in a demanding graduate programme to be completed at the end of a day’s work is challenging. Sustaining that interest over an eight or so year period requires great persistence as well. On-line learning contributes to sustaining the commitment in an interesting way. The opportunity to attend class is available at any time. This means one can engage in active learning much more frequently than if one attends class once a week. It is both

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1 Davie et. al. 1998 http://noisey.oise.utoronto.ca/projcool/conferences/EC0098.htm

2 Mann, Bruce. 2000. Perspectives in Web Course Management Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press
demanding and exciting. When one adds the challenge of trying to problematize local-global as well as personal-political expressions of daily teaching and learning, the stimulation is multiplied.