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EMOTIONALITY AND SOCIAL PRESENCE:
STORIES OF LEARNING ONLINE

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EMOTIONALITY AND SOCIAL PRESENCE: STORIES OF LEARNING ONLINE

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Abstract

This paper employs storying and self-reports to examine the role of emotionality as it relates to social presence and learning online. It examines the links between social presence and the social support provided by family, friends and the wider community and the way these contribute to identity which is seen as always changing, always in process, multiple, and contradictory. Of particular interest is the importance of the bios in facilitating or impeding student learning, the fears and reservations students have about building relationships and working online, the ways in which family support can complicate and interfere with learning, the emotional labour required of the learner to maintain family and social relationships, the ways in which students react to variations in social and academic capital, the effect of emotionality on work performance, and the role of the tutor in assisting students toward what Ting Toomey (in Weber, 2005) has called ‘mindful identity negotiation’.

Introduction

The paper is part of a much wider study into the role played by emotionality in knowledge construction. Fifteen self-nominating students responding to a call for expressions of interest agreed to share their stories of studying online in a series of one-on-one telephone conversations over a fifteen week period, supplemented with some emotional mapping (Beard, Clegg, and Smith 2005) and private blogging to which only the researchers had access. Besides seeking to establish the degree of social presence, the conversations involved assessing cultural background including academic and social capital; educational and socio-economic background; family, relationships and the life-space; employment and the effects of University study on work and vice versa; the experience of studying online; the role of the tutor (or e-moderator) in providing support; sources of anxiety and concern including role conflict; leisure pursuits and the management of stress; reflection on personal identity and the role of face, the presence of symbolic interactionism, gender issues, ethnicity, (Ting Toomey in Weber, 2005), as well as self-efficacy and self-esteem.

Profile of the participants

Background information on each of the participants yields an average age of 39.3 years. The oldest student was 58 and the youngest 26. There were four students in their mid to late twenties and nine students (60%) between 37 and 45. This is revealing in itself and suggests that recent school leavers did not feel sufficiently confident to participate in such a study. Two thirds of the group had only low to moderate academic capital whereas one third demonstrated high to very high. Academic and cultural capital were inferred.
from the stories and these inferences discussed with the participants. 33% of the group had had some experience of Higher Education in the past and another five had completed TAFE courses. Two students had undertaken the TEP (Tertiary Entrance Program) at Charles Darwin University (CDU). Two had done general nursing and one was self-taught. Most had encountered various forms of online learning at some stage in their careers.

Students who volunteered to participate were mainly drawn from Nursing, Education and Law. These courses represent those with the largest enrolments at CDU.

Bachelor of Nursing 6  
Bachelor of Education 3  
Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Education 1  
Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Law 1  
Bachelor of Laws 3  
Bachelor of Environmental Science 1

The University runs a Common Units program for all students which is normally undertaken in the first year. Eight students were studying CUC100 Academic Literacies and three students were studying CUC107 Northern Exposure, otherwise there was little commonality of subjects.  

There was a wide spread of employment occupations and socio-economic backgrounds. The oldest student, who had recently retired, was a consultant in the Drugs and Alcohol area. There were two managers, one in the creative arts and one in the hospitality industry. Of the six nurses, two worked in community nursing and one had withdrawn from the workforce. Three (all women) had worked in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations: grading potatoes in a factory, installing radiators or working in a shearing shed. Another was a receptionist in a legal office and another was an internationally published children’s writer. The predominant reasons for studying were being fed up with ‘crap jobs’, desire for a career change, escape from domesticity, restricted opportunities, fulfillment of a long term yearning and desire to study, and a desire for professional recognition.

Social presence and social support

Social presence is a vague and somewhat nebulous term referring to a generalised ‘feeling’ that there is some solidarity and empathetic understanding that results from everyone being online together. In fact social identity is forged out of this presence; the way one is regarded, acknowledged and accepted. In some cases it provides reassurance and comfortability but there are also a number of psychological factors involving self-knowledge, perception of others and face-work which can be inhibiting.

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1 The limitations of using a self-identifying sample are acknowledged in an earlier paper presented at the LERN conference in Johannesburg. See Grenfell (2007).
Social and material support is much easier to determine. The way in which direct social support offered through work and family relationships interacts with, induces or reinforces social presence appears to be crucial. It appears that the combination of social presence online and the availability of social support from friends, family and work, increases motivation and sustainability. Lack of social support, particularly from immediate family, does not always operate in a negative way. In some cases it can heighten determination to succeed. In others however it can have deleterious effects and may be unwanted or resented as intrusive.

Stacey (2000, p138) defines social presence as ‘the ability of online participants to project themselves into a textual environment which has few visual or contextual clues’. Garrison and Anderson (2003) extend this definition to read ‘the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real people’ (i.e. their full personality), through the medium of communication being used.’

For Garrison and Anderson (2003, p51) there are two major categories or dimensions of social presence online: (1) the affective including expression of emotions, the use of humour including teasing, cajoling, irony, understatement and sarcasm, and open communication including continuing a thread, quoting from others’ messages, referring explicitly to others’ messages, asking questions, complimenting or expressing appreciation, and expressing agreement; and (2) the cohesive including vocatives, addressing the group using inclusive pronouns, and phatic communion.

Social presence exists alongside cognitive presence and teaching presence. Cognitive presence has usually been privileged, as cognitive processes and outcomes are considered to comprise the core of transactions in terms of knowledge acquisition and application. ‘Cognitive presence means facilitating the analysis, construction and confirmation of meaning and understanding within a community of learners through sustained discourse and reflection largely supported by text-based communication’. (Garrison and Anderson 2003, p55)

Teaching presence refers to the way teachers intervene in the learning process to promote knowledge construction and application on the part of the group. This is not ‘a question of merely reassigning responsibility and control to the learner’ but of ‘shaping the right transactional balance’. (Garrison and Anderson 2003, p65). Teaching presence then, is concerned with to what extent tutors provide a feeling of trust and being welcomed, convey a sense of inclusion and belongingness, impart a sense of control and accomplishment, demonstrate a willingness to engage in discourse, adopt a conversational tone, and employ a questioning attitude.

Each of these three ‘presences’ affects the others and sets up tensions between them which in turn engender emotional responses within the group. For example there may be very little cognitive presence if there is no discernible teacher presence or activity. It is therefore important to determine the degree to which social presence is evident in the stories the participants tell and how this affects their learning. This is a qualitative dimension and is affected by psychological processes and entrenched beliefs about
teaching and learning (Dweck, 2000). For example, some students view the ‘social’ as undesirable, and would like to limit the phatic aspects of communion to coffee clubs or chat lines. Some view too frequent comments by the tutor on the discussion board as an intrusion in their learning. If the tutor is deliberately restrained and comments only infrequently, some students feel neglected and disregarded. (Grenfell, 2005A)

It is often assumed that networking amongst students working online is an important means of improving learning and obtaining social support. This assumption stems from a relational or connected view of knowledge popularized in women’s studies by Belenky et al (1986). Beginning with the concept of knowledge as a biological phenomenon of which knowing, being and living are inseparable dimensions, Okada (2005) identifies the following characteristics of knowledge viewed as a network in her study of collaborative learning: flexibility, plasticity, interactivity, adaptability, cooperation, sharing, support and self-organisation. For Okada, relational knowledge links a number of relations between one topic and other areas of knowledge which culminates in ‘completeness’ or thorough meaning of the topic. This is obtained through a non-linear process of inference, multiple connections, and unpredictable direction.

This relational activity is accompanied by a number of ‘affordances’. Beginning with the underlying imperative of metamorphosis or transformation, Okada (2005) argues that cyberspace affords a continually changing space. Participants therefore have to be comfortable with a number of other associated changes. These involve:

• Multiplicity, in which there is a multiplicity of components and interconnections affording alternative perceptions, interpretations and combinations. There is however an unrecognised assumption that if one covers enough bases and makes enough connections ‘something’ will arise but the nature of this ‘something’ is not addressed;

• Heterogeneity, by which Okada refers to the different structures of learning and knowledge, and the production of critical consciousness, as well as the interconnection of the different components which accompanies hypermedia;

• Exteriority, which takes account of the assumption that the feeding of information should come from outside. This sets up a reflective dialectical process with interiority as one manages ‘the pluralities within, across, and outside communities with different interests’ as experiences, practices and other lived examples are brought in from outside the web;

• Acentrism which assumes there is no beginning, no end, and not one centre but mobility of centres, which raises the question of how participants navigate through this diversity; and finally

• Proximity which allows the association of components as in when we log on and interact with anybody anywhere, at any time.
These affordances are not always taken up by participants in the current investigation. This lends support to Orey, Koencke, and Crozier (2003) who argue that the notion that social presence is necessary for learning needs closer examination. In their study of an online course for Microsoft Certified Systems Engineers, it appears that the most efficient way of learning for these students was through the online coach provided. Although participants did set up their own small learning communities through e-mail, these were highly instrumental. The study also revealed very limited questioning in dealing with instructors in some cases, and minimal interaction with other students, leading to the conclusion that local friends and acquaintances were probably more important. This was another finding of the current study.

Weber (2005, p83), citing Triandis (1999), points out that to communicate effectively with lecturers and co-contributors, students must be able to shift their frame of references, use new categories to understand cultural perspectives, and experiment with creative avenues of decision making and problem solving. In the current investigation many participants were not aware of these shifting frames of reference and cultural perspectives in so far as they applied to knowledge construction and knowledge management. Consequently, many saw the process as something like a jigsaw, or an unnecessary complication to their learning. They did not possess the self-organisation required although, as the data reveal, it is not so much that they were not self-organised and did not have strategies for learning but that these derived from older ways of knowing. The problem was that previously successful strategies have limited effectiveness and some participants stuck with these.

At what point is social presence reinforced by social support? Wellman (1998) challenged the view that computer mediated learning provides for companionship, social support and a sense of belonging. Wellman argued that much analysis is parochial and almost always treated the Internet as an isolated social phenomenon without taking into account group ethos and how interactions on the Net fit together with other aspects of people's lives.

Wellman (1998) carried out a number of ethnographic studies which demonstrated that offline connections were often brought to the Net. The issues raised in the research questions dealt with specialist as opposed to broadly-based relationships; the presence of weaker, less intimate relationships; reciprocated support and developing attachments; effects on other forms of 'real-life' community involvement; promotion of diversity and heterogeneity; and solidarity groups or thinly connected webs. (Wellman 1998, p170-171).

Generally speaking, ties were found to be weak in spite of the fact that net members were distinctive in providing information, support, companionship, and a sense of belonging to persons they hardly knew offline or who were total strangers. (Wellman 1998, p175). Reciprocity proved important in providing support and information on the net as a means of expressing one's identity, particularly if this was considered an essential component of self-identity. (Wellman 1998, p177).
The failure of interactants to develop strong ties was explained by the changing nature of community. The web provides for membership of multiple partial communities, that is, those that do not demand a person's full allegiance. Interactants were therefore better at acquiring resources from elsewhere. An interesting finding was that strong ties were generally developed between people who were socially similar and who were therefore likely to possess the same information (Wellman 1998, p185). This might be expected in that those with a shared social identity are likely to feel more comfortable with each other.

An analysis of the stories in the current study suggests some support for Wellman’s thesis but also contributes some surprising and unexpected insights such as incidental, informal, unplanned community support, the use of ‘family’ as de facto tutors, the importance of clubs and societies where professional young people who had already gathered could be found such as the local cricket club, the people who one works with such as qualified nurses on the night shift, unofficial mentors in the legal field anxious to see young people demonstrate their capabilities, partners who were already qualified or studying in their own right, and the websites and teaching materials of other universities. At the same time, it should not be thought that the support of family and friends is without problems.

**What the stories tell us**

The stories tell us a great deal about the emotional lives of the participants. Beginning with the amorphous nature of social presence, this section looks at the following:

- Networking and the Discussion Board
- Support from spouse or partner
- The part played by parents and family
- The role of friends and work colleagues
- The effects of work (or paid employment) on study
- The contribution of clubs, associations, and church groups
- The role of the tutor
- Cultural, social and academic capital
- The importance of the *bios*. The term is used here to refer to the effects of the biological world on our lives.
- The centrality of the life space

**The amorphous nature of social presence**

Social presence proves to be something of an amorphous concept in this study. The extent of social presence is limited and the effects differ markedly for each individual and need to be considered in conjunction with:

Self-understanding or a sense of personal identity. Not all the participants recognise the need for the ‘social’ and some actively decry it. Poppy refers to her antisocial tendencies and prefers her own company. For Des, study is definitely
not a social activity. Some recognize they are perfectionists so that when Melissa, for example ‘chokes’ in her tutorial, she experiences periods of considerable self-doubt. Others like Despina resist the perfectionist tag. Some demonstrate a greater degree of self-resourcefulness than others.

Self-efficacy. Those who enjoy a sense of self-efficacy do not need confirmation from others of their success and for some students social support is inconsequential. Self-efficacy tends to be associated with levels of self-confidence and inner resourcefulness. Rachel for example, demonstrates considerable self-reliance and resourcefulness.

Resiliency. Resiliency is demonstrated by coping with uncertainty and not knowing, accepting loneliness and isolation, and maintaining optimism and ‘flow’ in the face of potential set backs. (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). Both Rachel and Joyce in their different ways come to terms with periods of loneliness and isolation. One turns to her mother for assistance for transport and connection and the other relies on her partner. Becca maintains a sense of optimism and ‘flow’, psyching herself up by talking to herself and urging herself on.

Self-deprecating behaviour and self doubt. Others however engage in put downs, and there are examples of self-deprecation sometimes associated with age. Emma for example is very conscious of returning to study comparatively late in life and speaks frequently about ‘rehashing the grey areas’ or ‘jiggling the grey matter and trying to remember’.

In spite of the determination to maintain a positive outlook there are periods of self-doubt. Pat’s sense of self-efficacy is generally low and she frequently imagines the worst if things are not working out. Her self-image is not strong. At one point she refers to herself jokingly in ageist terms as an ‘old fart’. At other times she feels like ‘an absolute airhead … hoping that the God of Maths will just hit me with the [answer]’. Charles acknowledges some of the generational issues in his observations of how younger members of the online tutorial group react to his presence online.

Networking and the Discussion Board

In general the amount of networking and recourse to the discussion board is comparatively limited, confirming that social presence is not extensively sought. Charles who possesses a high level of academic capital, confeses to being very selfish when it comes to the discussion board, taking what will advantage him, although he admits to being pleased when his contributions are acknowledged. Whilst Becca finds she is learning to be more assertive and to find a voice, she is still hesitant and reluctant to commit because of what she sees as the responsibilities incurred. By asking questions she believes she is putting demands on others and this produces additional stressors. Susan expresses a desire for anonymity and has an uncomfortable sense of being watched. The collaborative learning experience she has online does nothing to overcome her fears.
Most involvement with other students online is limited to individual, one-off connections. This is true of Chris, Becca, Poppy, and Liz. The reasons for the diffidence displayed in becoming involved with others online are complex. For example, Rebecca’s beliefs about interacting with other students and seeking help and assistance, impact considerably on the way she constructs her identity. Course designers and e-moderators are often unaware of the way such beliefs militate against students participating in online discussions. Rebecca is concerned about the level of commitment such participation might involve and the responsibility accompanying this.

I don’t want to have to be logging onto Learnline every day. I don’t want someone to become attached to me and be expecting responses from me when I’m doing other things so I guess in a sense I don’t want to feel responsible for someone else.

She is also hesitant to send personal e-mails as she does not want to make anyone uncomfortable by asking them a question. There is a lot of facework and identity negotiation going on here. Rebecca herself would lose face if she couldn’t keep up the dialogue and she is concerned at the loss of face respondents might feel if they cannot answer her questions.

Early on in the interviews, Poppy had not formed any friendships through the Discussion Board on Learnline. However by week nine, things were starting to change. Asked if she had formed any connections she responded:

Yes I have, unusual for me because I’m such a loner. One of the girls who lives in Gove. I put a message up on Learnline saying if anyone needed any books from Darwin, I fly through. We’re only talking about three e-mails here, but we talk about teaching, grades, social events. It’ll be helpful for next semester, if I’ve got stuck. She has five kids, the youngest is 15.

Like Poppy, Chris does not undertake much networking, but retains an awareness of the feelings of others. She does not push too far and engages in considerable face work. One of the other girls in the community-controlled Aboriginal Health Service where she works four days a week is doing exactly the same units as she is and finding exactly the same problems.

I had a bit of a chat to her and she’s having the same sort of thoughts. You realise it’s not just you, but I don’t think she really wants to get together. I would have liked to have done a study group but she is an Aboriginal girl and I don’t think she wanted to pursue it. Even though we work together, we work in different areas. We’re both a bit stand-offish, private, keeping to our selves. We’ve overcome that, though. She’s got little children. Mine are grown up. So I helped her out with ideas for the final assignment. She sort of didn’t know where to start so I gave her a bit of a hand. There’s another girl here too, but I only met her at
the exam. You’re kind of on your own a fair bit if you don’t know other people. I don’t really mind being on my own as I can work at my own pace.

After the completion of the research, Chris is more confident about taking the initiative and has contacted three other people in Katherine taking CUC107. They have met for breakfast and she is going to study one morning with one of them, but she still doesn’t know many people.

As indicated few students make extensive connections except for Joyce who has had her writing published internationally and relies heavily on electronic communication. Many see the process as one of building trust but Becca’s story of having someone else’s work being posted through Gradebook together with the lecturers comments means she is not convinced of the confidentiality of the process. We will return to this story when we examine the support offered by spouses and partners in the next section.

Students rarely acknowledge the benefits of social presence except in a generalized way. This may be attributable to the way tutors promote interaction on the discussion board. Melissa, for example, is scathing of the use of the discussion board in her common unit.

I find it difficult for anyone in the class, or supposedly in the class, to discuss anything… They weren’t logging on, they weren’t giving it a go. I’ve given up waiting for anyone to discuss anything back. I even put it to the lecturer. I said look, this is a bit of a waste of time, the online discussion, but if you’d like to have a really good go, I mean you log on and say something totally the opposite to what I say but in a really denigrating manner. I give you permission, and let’s see if anybody says anything. I don’t know if she’s picked up on that.

Frankie who describes herself as a ‘real computer girl … who has been online since there was an online’, found she was being left to construct her own reference points. The discussion boards were confronting and too unstructured and she didn’t know how to interact. ‘Am I looking at it from the wrong way? Am I completely coming at it from the wrong angle, am I completely missing the point? I have no idea …’ Rather than post questions based on the readings, she questions her own self-efficacy and self-confidence. ‘I wouldn’t want to be the only one [contributing],’ she says. Moreover she is afraid of losing face. The Board prevents her from just saying what she thinks or feels because it is assessed. ‘I can’t just be free with my ideas and how I think’. This is why she considers the Board shallow and very surface. She is concerned that what she puts up ‘is there forever’ and will be held against her.

Frankie still lacks the identity resources and the academic capital to make good use of the discussion board.

I mean, it was good practice like expressing yourself and doing little paragraph notation things [the unit includes a series of annotated bibliographies] but I still felt it was like a mini-presentation, each one, rather than a discussion and I didn’t
really, it wasn’t, I didn’t really get to know the other people in my group by name or whatnot.

When asked if she would have liked it to be more personal she admits that she doesn’t feel strongly either way, although ‘it would have been interesting to get deeper into the materials’.

Pat is one of those students who found her way to alternative materials posted on the web by another university. Concerned that she did not really understand ‘the calculation side of things’, and had trouble ‘actually absorbing and getting it in her mind’, she learned of a reference to another website.

Someone on the discussion group mentioned that they’d found this on e-bay and I went to the University library and found it, and it was written by a very highly qualified midwife that lectured at Flinders, with a whole lot of different mathematical calculations, and it’s graduated throughout the nursing course; so I did the first portion and I did quite well with that. That was the sort of thing, like calculating different things and conversions and stuff.

Besides this, her experience with the Discussion Board was similar to Frankie’s, both very much dependent on their own resourcefulness. At the end of the semester Pat confesses to feeling very isolated saying ‘it all still seems a bit foreign’. She does not blame anyone for this situation but assumes responsibility for it herself.

I’ve just got to find ways … to shoot the breeze with somebody or be more vocal with my lecturers or extend myself out of my comfort zone, I guess. That’s what I need to take on board.

She attributes part of her difficulty to working online and believes it is very difficult to convey the stress people feel online.

Whereas when you are actually face to face to someone you can see how haggled someone is, you can watch how stressed, just those non-verbals as well that you can sense a person that someone’s getting through … [and] really grasping something.

With her home posted with ‘so many bloody theories and formulas so that it looked like a school room’, she worked herself into a frenzy, until like Frankie she eventually

Took a big breathe and looked at my partner and said there’s no possible way that they could expect me, as a first term student of a nursing degree, to possibly remember all this stuff. I was … really giving myself a hiding and that’s a bit of how I am. It’s this not good enough syndrome… You know I’m forty five and then I’m expecting myself to be this professional forty five year old student with knowledge and I’m not. I’m just a baby… I’ve got to remember that and bring it back to some realistic measurement.
The study, though, is never out of her head. She has got a set of lift weights and a treadmill so as she says ‘there is no reason for me not to make the most of what’s around me’. In addition she has just signed on as a puppy raiser for the guide dogs [association] and is ‘really excited’.

We get our little bundle of joy next week, so that will keep me company and make me get up. Most of it’s toileting at the start so every twenty minutes, half an hour, I’ll have to pick her up and take her out to do her needs and that will give me a little break.

These findings are in contrast to those of Beuchot and Bullen (2005) who looked at interpersonal interaction in courses lasting over a year or more and investigated relationship between educational quality and social relationships. For them, interpersonality relates to the creation of relationships amongst participants, and contrasts with impersonality which is solely task-orientated. (Beuchot and Bullen, 2005, p68). Interpersonality was not particularly prevalent in the current study, but there are signs of its emergence. It is a slow and hesitant process in most cases with students not wishing to intrude on others or offend.

Support from spouse or partner

The degree of support from spouse or partner varies considerably. The ability to manage academic study and personal relationships is crucial but is achieved in very different ways. For Becca, her partner is her ally and close confidant. Chris a young mother ‘just couldn’t do it [study] without him’. Pat just needs ‘someone to talk to’. Some stories reveal gender identities involving strategic acceptance of patriarchy on the one hand and oppositional feminist resistance on the other. In some cases the partner is also studying or already has a professional qualification. The actual support received includes proof-reading, acting as a listening post, having someone to talk to, tracking down library books and resources, emotional nurturing and identity construction.

Becca recognizes her need for recognition and the encouragement and support of her family and fiancée. ‘There is nothing like, a sibling, whatever, who says “come on Bec, you can do this”’. Her fiancée, Jack, provides this in numerous ways. ‘His key role was just sitting there with me, being that person, giving me a pat on the back’.

Maintaining positive flow proved challenging, especially when her confidence in the University was severely tested when the lecturer posted comments intended for someone else as an attachment to her assignment.

Rebecca: Something, besides missing the phone call [from the interviewer, MG, who did not ring as scheduled], that really, really upset me, was that when I eventually got my results for my first assignment, a lecturer had posted comments on somebody else’s assignment onto mine.
M.G: It’s my worst nightmare as a tutor.

Rebecca: I know, I was so upset. It was just the strangest thing. I was so upset. It was such a small thing. I couldn’t call my lecturer, so I quickly sent an e-mail to my lecturer, I had to be so polite, but I was about to get so angry. I said to my fiancée ...

Together they worked everything out about what to say in the e-mail.

We copied the comments and put them into my e-mail saying that they ‘don’t appear to reflect my assignment’ pointing out that ‘I’m in the legal industry, not the health industry’.

Here, Becca and her partner become allies in dealing with the university. They use their combined academic capital to determine the strategies with which to deal with the university and together they manage her emotional response. Elsewhere I have discussed the symbolic interactionism in identity negotiation which characterizes such dealings (Grenfell, 2007) using the work of Ton-Toomey in Weber (2005).

Not all relationships are so supportive. Joyce refers to the general lack of support from her partner.

I’m forty this year so I think he had a mid-life crisis about two years ago and he quit his job ... and I didn’t want, well, because of my back, [Joyce was involved in a life-threatening car accident] to spend my life on my feet, and I also know I can’t rely on him for an income.

In the following extract, as she talks about the things that can go wrong and interrupt her weekly schedule, she reveals the general lack of support she receives. This only steels her resolve and she is uncompromising in the pursuit of her Law degree. She totally rejects any patriarchal attempts to control her and make decisions for her. As she says at the end ‘I don’t need permission to study; it’s my life’.

GS What goes wrong? What happens? And what do you do about it?
Joyce Kids take time off school because they’re sick. Husband takes time off work because they’re sick. You just have to kind of work around it. Like the cat dies at the bus stop time, you go to the bus stop and you’re in the middle of a …, and what do you do. I’m sorry, but my priority is uni so when it comes to it, and I know it might sound cruel, but let hubby deal with the cat and the kiddies until I’m finished.

GS So is he supportive of you doing this?
Joyce No.

GS Okay. Did he say he was going to be supportive?
Joyce No.

GS Did you talk to him about this?
Joyce  Yes.
GS  Okay, and so you went ahead anyhow, is that right?
Joyce  Yep. Absolutely.
GS  Okay. So the consequences are that you don’t have the sort of high levels of support that you might have. How is that affecting the way you go about what you’re doing?
Joyce  Um, it’s something they’re all just going to have to adjust to.
GS  So it’s not your problem, it’s theirs?
Joyce  Yep.
GS  Okay. And are they adjusting? It’s only early days.
Joyce  Well, it’s only three weeks in, but you know, they’ve tried the aspirin, for the car keys, and I go ‘you’re not that sick’. ‘You don’t know how sick I am’, and I say ‘when I’m sick you don’t know how sick I am, so you will be expecting to share in my income, once I have graduated, so I expect you to support me along the way and if you can’t do that then obviously we have different destinations in life’. I’m really sorry but that’s how I feel about it.
GS  Okay. Well, it will be interesting to see how things pan out in relation to your ability to mix all of the conflicting interests there are in your life, and how it turns out.
Joyce  Yeah. Well, I know which ones won’t go and which ones will go. My priorities, it’s kind of odd but I know I’ve changed and I don’t need permission to study; it’s my life.

Her sense of personal identity and autonomy is also very strong:

Joyce. The kids have enjoyed having me around more but hubby’s not happy, but that’s his problem really. That’s what the painting is about tonight. I’m painting the bedroom the colour I want, He’s at work; he’ll find out when he gets home.
GS. Okay, what colour is it?
Joyce. Purple. You know, it’s just one of those things like, if you’re not prepared to do stuff, I’ll do it, but I don’t need, you know, you don’t qualify to have any input.

One of the difficulties resulting from multiple identities is that these identities are often in conflict with each other, creating stress, anxiety and guilt. Support from husband and family can in fact get in the way of study in such situations. In the middle of her trying to meet the demands of the law unit, the deadlines of her publisher, and the demands of her children, Joyce’s family organized a surprise party for her birthday although she had specifically ‘said not to’.

I mean it was nice, I had quite a good time but you know, it was tinged with guilt because I was supposed to be doing something else.

Even as the interview unfolds, the children require attention. When the interviewer asks her if she wants time out to go and settle them down she replies
No, because if it was tomorrow it would be the same thing. It just doesn’t stop. You know, my attention’s not on them so …

A student with a partner who is also studying or who has already qualified, has to adjust to different ways of working. Dylan discusses the differences in the way that he and has partner, who works in the ICT industry, operate. When asked to describe his life-space, Dylan talks of the way he works with the dining table covered with books so that he can turn to his right and look straight out of the window and into the bush which he ‘quite likes’. He continues:

There’s another desk completely different in the corner set up with another computer on it. That was the reason why we eventually bought a wireless. Three computers used progressively at the weekend! It was a pain trying to get cords worked out. My wife works a lot different to me. I like peace and quiet. But she can work with the TV going. I can’t read with distraction, I don’t absorb enough. We’ve not worked together too much. She’s a bit more intuitive than I am in that way and she accepts it’s a fairly big step I’ve taken and she’s very busy with her job. In some way it’s been really good as I can do as I please. I can sit down and study and work my self into a … routine. I know if she was here I wouldn’t have studied at night. She has been very supportive, probably without me realising it, in that way.

The process is not without difficulty however.

The more that I do, I’m getting better at this writing stuff. My wife hasn’t had to correct as much compared to what you were when you decided to do it. I suppose it’s always frustrating because I’m comparing with her, but I just have to get used to it. I can pick something up and do something manually. But this, it’s a question of stress. It doesn’t come naturally.

Des approached her studies not wanting to be cut off from her partner. Not wishing to remove herself from family, like her own father and step-mother appear to have done, and looking for a home reminiscent of their Darwin life-style, things don’t work out the way she expected.

When I first set up my study space, I decided to put the computer in the living room so I wouldn’t be cut off from my partner. I’ve always resented that, like my dad and my step-mother. My dad taught me well! They locked themselves away. Removed themselves from the family. I always find that disturbing. I wanted to create a study space but it didn’t work. Conversation’s OK, but you don’t put the telly on. I really tried. In the end, I got a second computer and set it up in the spare room, and that has worked. Guess that’s something I’ve learned about myself. I had this ideal thing that I could study in a social space. And then of course realised it doesn’t work for me. I’m quite disappointed to have to admit that.
Susan offers us a rare insight into how to cope with domestic disputes which she appears to take in her stride. Her life is compartmentalised and she keeps her study separate from her personal life and work life. ‘I may be stinking angry at home, but I have to work with him, then I can go home and be angry again.’ She is clearly dependent on her partner to whom she looks for permission. For example, she relates how she acquired another dog, a working kelpie, that the Palmerston pound were going to put down, and how her partner told her she could keep him.

**Parents and family**

The stories reveal that parents and family are not always the strong, supportive, motivating force we might expect and can put a negative spin on success. In spite of the tensions between her and her foster parents, Susan remains very dependent on her adoptive father and seeks his approval and acknowledgement. This need for approval contributes to her gender identity and no doubt spurs her ambitions to succeed, but it comes at an emotional cost.

After I spoke to you the last time everything was going OK. Then, a couple of week ago, I spoke to my Dad and he put a negative spin on everything and he said how do you know how well you’re doing if you haven’t got tested or examined? It didn’t make me feel very good, ’cos I felt I was doing well enough to pass. He’s been a police officer all his life and that might have had something to do with it. For instance, I didn’t tell him I was doing the Tertiary Enabling Program. Just did it and rang to tell him. He was really happy, now he went and lifted up the bar that much higher. I did fairly well last year, now he expects I will get Ds and HDs as well. And I’m doing more subjects!

This additional stressor goes on throughout the semester although she keeps telling him she is not concerned with individual grades for assignments saying ‘It’s what you get overall that counts.’ All this came at a time when she had a cold and ‘felt all crappy’ and couldn’t work. Whilst parents and family can be supportive, they can also take the gloss off ones success.

The physical situation in which Susan is learning has also dramatically changed. Physical place has an important effect on our learning (Grenfell, 2005B) as will become apparent when we examine the life-space in more detail. In the second interview, Despina reveals the extent of the disruption in her studies that the move to Queensland has brought about.

It’s been a very disruptive time, personally as well, as I had my mother for two weeks. I feel I’m falling behind and haven’t been progressing that well. Having mum here, I feel like, I know, I’m not getting resolution on these other issues and can’t really get my teeth into it.

As a pose to Darwin, I’m now studying [entirely] externally. There’s not a library I can go to that’s less than 30 minutes drive. It hasn’t the same atmosphere as when studying externally in Darwin where I could get into a city library. I was
able to focus. My mother would come to visit and I could say well, mom, I’m going to the library. She would often come with me and potter around but here, when I’m at home, it’s very different. She’ll not talk to me but it’s harder to focus. It’s a new skill for me. It’s a little bit like being pulled two ways, just being aware she was here. I would interrupt myself. She’s gone now. She lives in NSW.

Moreover, having had a father who lectured at a university ‘you learn something from the lecturer’s point of view and it’s not as scary as being on campus, going to see dad at work.’ She is studying education because she is looking for something ‘more family friendly’, and which will provide more security than the arts.

Joyce relates how she learned to cope with loneliness in a time before she began studying and acknowledges the help received from her mother.

I used to [suffer from loneliness]. It was really hard when the kids weren’t old enough to talk. My husband worked very long hours and he would leave the house at 8.30 in the morning and wouldn’t get home till midnight, and I was with two people who basically couldn’t speak English, no car and I didn’t really know anybody in town and I had no access to my family who were three thousand km away. So that was a bit of a tough one to get through but I did, which just made me stronger. And then eventually, actually my mother bought me a car which was just wonderful, and that gave me access to my community and I’m now the public officer at the local art gallery and I’ve established a writing group with a couple of other writers.

For many students the centrality of family is highly important. Becca’s life revolves around family.

My sister had a boy and I’m on top of the world. My older sister is having a baby in a couple of weeks’ time then my little sister’s coming over for a family reunion. We went shopping yesterday for bridesmaid’s material, everything is such a huge step. My auntie is making me my dress. It really shouldn’t be a stressful thing. The reception is in a hall close by.

The social calendar is very full: ‘Friday, dinner with Jack’s parents. Easter, my sister’s coming down with her husband. Dinner Saturday night. Then the engagement party.’

Chris also has a close attachment to family and she prefers home and home life. In this she is highly self-reliant within the family group. She can cope with loneliness and isolation. Her biggest regret in the first interview was ‘not doing my garden’. ‘It’s the little things that I miss. You give up a lot, you don’t have a social life, I don’t anyway. I just fit things around my study.’ But, by the end of the research the roses and the petunias are in flower.

Support is forthcoming from her son.
I’ve actually got a bet with my son, as he had a Maths exam. Whoever has the lowest has to take the other to lunch and he got 71% so… It’s a bit of encouragement for him as well and gives the kids a bit of an incentive. He’s in year 10 so he actually helped me out with some physics. He’s in top science and maths class. I spoke to his science teacher but he said he’s not so good at physics so we won’t go there!

At one point in the second interview, the interviewer commented that she sounded ‘a bit flat or dispirited’. It transpired that her husband was away for the first time in fifteen years. ‘He’s fantastic,’ she says, ‘I couldn’t do it without him. He’s helped me out a bit and I share things with him all the time.’

Another contributing factor was a disturbed night. Chris’s eleven year old daughter has Biliary Cirrhosis, a genetic disorder.

She insists on sleeping with me, itches all the time. She hit me in the head and kicked me in the back, so I’ve had hardly any sleep. She’s on medication, but it doesn’t do much good. They told us that she’d have to have a liver transplant, but she’s done really well. Hopefully her body will be able to adjust as she gets older.

In addition, the semester had just ended and ‘I’m kind of chilling out’.

Family support or support from ones partner is frequently organised along patriarchal lines and reveals something of the gender identity of the respondents. Frankie, for example, says that at first she didn’t get much support from her partner ‘because he’s very busy doing two jobs and what not’. Towards the end when she needed more time to study for the exams ‘he was a bit more supportive and gave me more time’. Susan is ‘allowed’ to take on yet another dog.

The amount of support received appears to have no bearing on final outcomes. For example Frankie who is learning to become a self-directed learner and become more self-reliant, achieves HDs in both her units. Nevertheless, learning has not been a pleasant experience for Frankie.

I found in the beginning I was stressing myself out way too much and putting myself under a lot of pressure to where I wasn’t enjoying it at all.

Family and friends often impose reciprocal responsibilities which cut across any social support which might be forthcoming. For example, during the course of the interviews Susan has to interrupt her studies to be ‘a bridesmaid at some wedding …I’ve never worn a dress so that’ll be interesting’. Once again, things did not go according to plan:

I couldn’t get off when I was supposed to because of all the rains. [The same rains that flooded parts of Katherine that Chris refers to in her story.] The road at Berry Springs flooded so I was two days getting down there. That was a big panic for
them, not for me. I was glad but it put me behind for when I got back I had to write an essay for Friday. I thought I’d never get done. Surprisingly, I got a Credit for it so I was pretty happy about that. I’m always surprised to get a good mark.

The way in which family can influence study is illustrated in Pat’s story. Her final decision to enroll came after her fourteen year old daughter pointed out the gap between Pat’s unfulfilling life style and what she, Pat, would like to do. When she suggested her daughter choose a career and lifestyle she was passionate about,

she turned round and said ‘how can you tell me that when you don’t do it?’ Dead set, she was right ... I’ve been running along this kind of blind path for years just trying to make everybody else feel comfortable and me feeling very uncomfortable.

As the course proceeds, Pat admits to having a few concerns because she is not getting the interaction with peers and others she feels she needs and she feels considerably isolated. The result is she uses the family to ‘sprout off about things I’m learning’ and the family becomes an informal tutorial group to the extent that ‘it’s driving them nuts’.

They look at me like, yeah? And that means, like, I said to my partner; I was very moved by some research I was doing and I do cry pretty easily, but I was, it was about AIDS in Africa for a particular assignment about women’s health and I found myself in a … where there was a piece about this man’s address to a particular group of people, and he was passionate enough in this written address that I was emotionally moved to tears; and my partner came home and saw me kind of mopping myself up and said something about, you know, gees, this university is going well then. And I went on with how these different, I recounted what this man had shared in this address and how amazing the difference in lifestyles between what we enjoy here and what other people in the world have to face, and I was really pretty passionate about recounting some of these stories; and he was just looking at me. And I said I’d better pull up here, you’d better get used to this because I don’t have people to talk with. I’m shut in my house with my computer and I’m sitting here from the time my kids leave in the morning till they come home, in my quiet time, beavering away with no one to talk on these issues with; and I find that a bit isolating. And the discussion groups, I just feel like I’m being too verbose if I hammer away at them, you know; it’s not the same as that verbal intercourse, you know.

By the time of the final interview however, there were big hugs and kisses when the results came out. ‘They all did high fives and the son and my partner just whispered to each other how brainy I was.’

The role of friends and work colleagues
Friends can also act as surrogate tutors. The dog training Susan undertakes brings her into contact with people ‘who are fairly academic and who I can talk to if I’m having troubles’. This provides her with a measure of what is required. On one occasion, after ringing up someone and asking for assistance with a chemistry problem, she came to the conclusion that it was not as hard as she thought it was and the next time she was able to do it by herself. Interacting with people in clubs and societies, and building networks of friends provides additional learning opportunities. Susan’s experience here is similar to Emma’s at the cricket club where her husband plays. Emma quickly learns to ‘sort out the boys from the University’ for some additional ‘tutorial work’, as she puts it.

Friends who are already qualified can sometimes confer prior acceptance into ones chosen profession. This was important to Despina. Although the overall apprehension following her move to Queensland ‘had not yet started to disperse’, she has ‘friends who are all teachers or working in different areas of the humanities’. She is well informed about the schools in the area and is disappointed that she could not secure a Practicum placement in the schools ‘with the most progressive principals’. In one sense she has already been received into the teaching profession by her future colleagues.

Nevertheless, friendships, whilst providing essential support at particular times, can also contribute to additional stress. Having had her study preparation disrupted due to an imminent cyclone, Poppy confesses to feeling:

> very snappy. [Laughter] Tense. Friends are trying to organise me and catch up with the kids play group. They’re texting me when I’m trying to work. I think will you leave me alone? But you can’t do that. You have to try and integrate your life with your study, otherwise it will all fall apart. Plus you try to keep on top of housework, and then you go away for two days. So you are effectively living your life five days in town. So yes, it’s very full on, stress levels have been very full on. I’ve been thinking of you. They’re out there.

Guilt, at the thought of neglecting one’s friends is another stressor which has to be managed and addressed if the level of panic is to be reduced. In Poppy’s view

> there is a reduction in the panic simply because you have now got the work done and friends give you the support you need. It’s more of a guilt factor in that I haven’t given the time I should. I’ve just had a good friend who’s come back from down south and I know she would like to catch up a lot more. She’s being very understanding and tells me she realizes I have to study. It doesn’t help when you have two children at home and you want to go out somewhere, and you’re told ‘no you can’t come up to my place’.

However, support from friends means giving support in return. Providing material support to others in difficulty is a moral responsibility for Chris. Although she does not see herself as a very social person, particularly in view of the demands of the course, she is loyal and dependable and demonstrates considerable empathy. This comes through in
her account of the floods which affected Katherine, part of the same cyclonic activity which interrupted Poppy’s plans as we have just seen.

Friends came to stay with us, her and her animals. [In the tight confines of her shed] And you just can’t study when there’s other people. She was living where the office is. It felt such a waste of four days, but we helped her out and she appreciated it.

This same sense of compassion for other is displayed when she had to take a break for two weeks to deal with a major crisis.

It’s been a bit of a struggle. My daughter’s best friend came to stay. She’s an 11 year old Aboriginal girl and an only child. It’s been a big culture shock. Her dad has not been coping and attempted suicide. So I’m taking on all that at the moment. It’s been a real shock. I’ve been having to deal with her family in Adelaide and it’s been much harder to focus.

Work colleagues contribute to social support but generally offered little from an academic point of view in this study. When asked how study affects her work, Poppy reflects on generational differences in the way that her work colleagues interact.

Study has affected my work because my work is mainly public relations. You tend to talk about what you are doing at uni. So your conversations can get quite interesting. I did a reading about learning about yourself: feedback and standing back and getting to know yourself. So I was trying to do that last flight. [Laughter] So you do stand back and listen more intensely to what people are saying. I guess you look at bigger picture as well … most of the girls are a lot younger than me. Talking about products they are using whilst I’m talking about global warming and stuff. I was crewing with a girl who’s doing nursing externally. She was under a fair amount of pressure. Five weeks behind. We were chatting and boosting each other up.

Rebecca finds that there are not a lot of people at work that she can talk to about her study.

I find people at work look at my work, they’re not uninterested but say they can’t … I’m not the person to ask. People, I find, will say how is study going but don’t want to talk about it, there’s no one who feels they can talk to you about…

But the office environment is socially supportive.

We are different to any other office. We are a very close group of people. We’ve been through a few things together. Last October we lost a fellow who was working with us. It was a motor bike accident. He died. He was a gem of a person. He actually encouraged me to study law in the first place. We’ve sort of
been through things together. We don’t hang around the office and have big conversations but treat each other with great respect.

In examining the effects of isolation on her studies in both a rural and urban situation, Rachel emphasizes the importance of a support system.

GS Okay, now just a question that turns a little bit. Now that you’re doing the study as a distance student, and you’re five thousand km away from the university that you’re studying through, even though you’re in a large city, do you have any sense of being isolated or isolation in relation to your study now?

Rachel Not really because I’ve got the support system I need, but if I wasn’t working then yes, I’d say definitely there is; because you haven’t got that many students around you that you can go and say hey, I’m doing the same units as you are, because you don’t know, you don’t know them. There would be a type of isolation because in a city, I find that people have got their own agendas, they’ve got their own … and they’re not really worried about what you’re doing or how you’re going or anything like that. So as far as isolation in that way, yes.

The effects of work (or paid employment) on study

In discussing the way the conditions of her employment influence her studies and vice versa, Poppy speaks of how tired she has been. Part of this is attributable to the job and the fact that I have to get out of bed so early and working in an aircraft and working at a high altitude. The brain’s too tired to think, so next morning I can get some productive study done… I was up to 2 o’clock the other morning. Then I’m out of bed at 8. Yesterday I was just like a zombie but went straight to sleep with the boy. You get so tired but at least, I realize I’m tired. And there’s no point in getting snappy with ‘the big boy’ or the little boy.

The fatigue associated with the emotional labour involved in working as a flight attendant is well known (Ferguson, 1984). Poppy’s reaction to the imminent cyclone is also worth considering in more depth. Threatening weather conditions can impose even greater emotional demands.

We’ve had a cyclone in the middle of that. That puts everything on hold. Have to pack up the house and unpack the house. Study isn’t really important when a category 5 is heading your way. Flights have to be crewed. They wanted him [her partner] to evacuate the aircraft out of town and we would have to go with him and be stuck in Gove. I’m battling on. I can effectively only do, if I’m lucky, about two hours during the day because I have to work around my toddlers nap time. Had to get my priorities right. So to lose those two hours for three days affected me quite badly. Then I’m thinking, do I take my books with me? And then do they have the Internet? Probably lose power if it did hit.
In some ways, Poppy’s work as a cabin manager means that when she’s away she can take her work with her but this is not as advantageous or easy to manage as might be expected.

You never know when you’re going to break down. I find I do more productive work at home. I do background reading while I’m away. I get a better understanding that way. I only work on the plane when I’ve got a break. I’ve tried that a couple of time and tend to go to sleep so I find that very dangerous. I tend to sit next to the sun where it’s nice and warm and the sound of the engines nods you off.

Allan, whose work demands led him to withdraw from the study, tells of taking his study materials with him as he left port on the tuna boats.

Rebecca reflects on the ways in which the course is influencing her work and vice versa

I’ve always been a worker who works as hard as they can, as efficiently as I can, runs around the office, attempts to do a hundred things at a time. I’ve learned I need to think and take time in order to achieve things. With study I have to sit back and think about things. So, I’ve started taking that to work with me. I’m going slower. This adversely affect my work because I’m taking more time. I’ve basically been told I have to get back to my efficient fast mode. I’m an assistant to one of our solicitors and she’s just gorgeous and lovely. One of the readings, it’s just fantastic… She said ‘Bec you’ve really got to start…you know we are not in the library here.’ I tend to think I’m becoming a procrastinator… I’m trying to absorb absolutely everything. I’m seeing legal documents, I’m seeing the legal process, so I’m trying to absorb things along the way. Work will always influence my study but I have to be careful not to allow my career to take over my life.

Clubs, associations, and church groups.

All the participants engaged in activities outside of their normal work and study which brought them valued relief when they found themselves stressed or under pressure.

A significant contribution to stress reduction for Susan is ‘the dog thing’. Although she doesn’t show her dogs, she takes them for obedience training to the local Kennel Club where she is learning to be an instructor. She also finds time to enter the dogs in an Endeavour Trial in Alice Springs over a 20 km course: ‘He’ll make it,’ she jokes, ‘but I don’t know if I will’. Some commentators stress the importance of empathising with animals in the process of gaining emotional intelligence. For Susan, her interest in dogs provides relief from working in the car radiator workshop and her nursing studies. Even allowing for the self-presentation and face work exhibited in this extract, Susan has an interesting take which marks her off as ‘different’.

It seems strange how I can do all this and manage my time effectively and other people having trouble. I don’t have any troubles like they do. I don’t understand
what makes me different to everybody else? Other people don’t know how I can study full time and still get by.

The dog training does bring her into contact with people ‘who are fairly academic and who I can talk to if I’m having troubles’. On one occasion, after ringing up someone and asking for assistance with a chemistry problem, she came to the conclusion that it was not as hard as she thought it was and the next time she was able to do it by herself.

Interacting with people in clubs and societies, and building networks of friends provides additional learning opportunities. Susan’s experience here is similar to Emma’s at the cricket club where her husband plays. Emma quickly learns to sort out the boys from the girls at the University for some additional ‘tutorial work’, as she puts it.

Emma is into furniture restoring. Whilst committed to work and family, she says

busy people can do lots of things. I’m not someone who likes to sit around. To me washing, cooking, cleaning, etc., is not really what life’s about. I can do it once a week. I’m in the middle of restoring a set of old drawers as well. Something different to break it up, otherwise things become too intense. You’ve got to have a short term thing that you can achieve, and long term things.

Attendance at church and involvement in community life are of crucial importance to Becca. Although she is only an intermittent churchgoer, her religion means a great deal to her.

I’m about to go off to church, I was just thinking this week religion has not been discussed [in the interviews]. It certainly has a lot to do to do with my positivity. That’s where I derive my strength from as well. I pray to make it through this course. It makes an impact as well, and puts a bit more meaning into my life. I haven’t been a regular churchgoer, but I try to be a good parishioner.

Joyce as we have seen has her writing and publishing. After her motor accident, as a young married mother she experienced ‘extreme isolation, big time’.

And then I started, when my kids went back into kindy and all that sort of stuff I started writing early learning resources, started writing plays for kids, which I’ve had three performed, wrote a picture book which has been published. I continued to write poetry through all of that and I’ve been published pretty extensively. Yeah, but it’s not actually made me any money.

GS You’ve got a really diverse range of interests that you have, and experiences.
Joyce They are kind of inter-related though, like, if you think about it; art, writing, I got into art through writing, you know; through printmaking, and … pottery and even my pottery still involved writing. So it’s really, you know, it’s all about writing for me.

Besides contributing to her extensive store of cultural capital, Joyce’s writing and international publishing connections and her other artistic endeavours provide relief from
the intensity of study and sustain her in times of loneliness. Participating in community work means a great deal to her. She is now the public officer at the local art gallery and has established a writing group with a couple of other writers.

Finally, Pat’s involvement in the running program organised by her son’s school makes her feel good and has proved ‘really positive’ and ‘energising’. In this program she helps a little, slower girl with her running. ‘She and I run together and I’m able to do two km.’ This kind of social commitment involves positive action and is very important to Pat, just as the writers’ club is to Joyce.

Cultural, social and academic capital

The stories told so far all reveal the importance of cultural, social and academic capital. Susan’s story illustrates the way she is beginning to acquire these forms of capital. Susan had completed her TEP studies online where she felt ‘anonymous and comfortable’. She nevertheless remained frightened and intimidated by the University.

I find it better to study online. I’m actually scared to go into the university. I like it on line. You can talk to people if you want to but it’s also very anonymous. I’ve never been in there [i.e., the University] to see a lecture. I don’t know how that happens. It seems frightening. I was even worried about going in there to buy my book. I thought that would be such a horrifying experience. I’ve got a friend who works there and she took me in. It sort of helped. What’s all the fuss about and why?

Eventually, at the urging of the interviewer, when she ventures onto campus she does not attend the face-to-face internal class for her common unit but chooses a day when a Symposium on the environment is in process and finds herself at a presentation on Water Resources.

Do you want to hear a funny story? You know we were talking about going to the university for a lecture? There was a symposium on. I got a very funny view of university and what people do. They sit down and have a few lecturers then go out to morning tea and lunch.

Leaving to one side the face work and self-protection which influences the telling of this story, there is a very real fear of the University present here and the naivety of the teller indicates the kind of identity work and identity resources required.

The influence of the bios

This section examines the way in which participants find themselves affected by the bios, the biological world which intrudes on and governs our lives. These include the effects of giving up smoking on study and work, the effects of pregnancy, concerns over body-
image related to the time spent sitting studying, illness and viral infection, and self-defining memories of earlier encounters with the bios.

Effects on study and work of giving up smoking. Poppy is very aware of the effects of stress in her life and engages in a great deal of stress management. In this she is highly strategic although she does not always act on her decisions. An additional stressor is that she has stopped smoking after 24 years, but generally she remains positive: ‘I don’t often feel negative emotions. I’ve felt a lot over the last three days because I’ve stopped smoking after 24 years. Deep breathing a lot!’ But she has not felt aggravated by anything that’s happened in the course. ‘No, absolutely not. I knew I had to stop by the time I was forty. And I’m nearly that.’

Nevertheless ‘it’s hard to sit in front of the computer when you don’t smoke. I might leave it a couple of days. I couldn’t go cold turkey and stay sane.’ She wears a patch on her arm but says ‘I think it more psychological than anything else’ and she finds herself getting irritable and emotional:

I get grumpy, and I want to snap but I know it’s nicotine withdrawal. I think someone’s doing something wrong and it’s got nothing to do with me. That’s rude. I wouldn’t have noticed that a couple of days ago.

The effects of pregnancy. Throughout this period Despina has been carrying her first child and together we explored the effects of the bios on her emotional life and her learning. Her biggest fear was that the baby would come before she had completed her assignments. Her final assignment for Creating Positive Relationships was quite difficult to get through ‘because of me, not the assignment’. It was ‘the last thing that came to me naturally when I woke up in the morning. It took a lot longer, and I was never convinced I had answered the question.’

The importance of the bios becomes more and more evident as the forthcoming baby becomes her central focus. The pregnancy had not been easy, as ‘the baby was lying all wrong’ and Despina started having very bad sciatic nerve problems. This meant she was not able to sit for very long, and ‘sitting is what you need to do to do the assignment’.

When asked about the impact of the baby on her studies, she reveals it has been much on her mind.

You couldn’t begin to imagine. I’m terrified of that. I’m enrolled in two subjects for next semester but I’m thinking already, I may have to drop one, just because people tell me lifestyle changes are so huge. In a sense it’s all been good timing, but I don’t want to give up study altogether. I want to keep a subject going during the baby’s first six months so that I keep my brain engaged because I’m a bit terrified of losing my learning capacity. I don’t want it to become just baby, baby, baby but how the two are going to marry in I have no idea!

In a subsequent interview, she reveals:
What is happening to my mind is that I’m becoming more and more focussed on the baby. And I’m finding it harder to… really to think straight. It’s very weird what’s happening. I have studied before and I’ve worked before in positions which need strategic management … I really notice that my thinking is not very effective. I look back at what I’ve done and I miss things and do stupid things like leaving the car keys in the car. They say that that happens to pregnant women.

Physically it’s becoming a lot more tiring. My baby is sitting on my sciatic nerve. I can sit but when I get up I’m in quite a bit of pain so I get up to undo the damage. The longer I sit the more painful it is. It’s a whole new learning experience for me. I think if I was working in a work place it might be different. I’ve had friends who worked right up till the last week.

Perhaps because she does not view her study as a social activity, there is not the social support that might have been forthcoming, consequently she finds her study ‘so hard to engage with’. In addition she continues to worry about the baby coming early. ‘If it does come early what happens? The uni would be sympathetic but…’

The effects of the pregnancy are evident in reduced grades.

I got back my second assignment from Semester 1 which I submitted when I was 35 weeks pregnant. My first C-. I usually get HDs and Ds. Comment and corrections mainly dealt with grammar but it couldn’t have been solely that. The tutor didn’t show as much interest in what I’d done and comments were more basic.

Despina’s experience is well-represented in the literature although there is some dispute as to the extent of the actual level of impairment of pregnancy on cognition. In their review of the literature, Crawley, Dennison and Carter (2003), discovered numerous anecdotal accounts suggesting some pregnant women believe they suffer concomitant cognitive impairments, including problems with memory and concentration (p69). Evidence from studies using objective tests of cognition have proved equivocal. However, these researchers admit that most studies they encountered focused on memory performance rather than attentional ability (p70).

In their own work, Crawley, Dennison and Carter (2003) used tests of verbal memory, divided attention and focused attention during second trimester, third trimester, 6 weeks post-partum and 1 year post-partum and compared results with a group of non-pregnant women. They found no difference in performance on objective tests and no change in performance over time, except for improvement in the measure of focused attention. Self-assessment ratings showed that in the second trimester, the pregnant women rated themselves as more impaired on all cognitive abilities. Women in a follow up study also revealed mild impairment in their third trimester which involved ability to remember what they had read. The results showed perceived cognitive impairments during pregnancy. Mild impairments may not be revealed in objective tests because it can be
overcome by conscious effort in short periods of testing. Moreover, these may not constitute actual impairments but be the result of depressed mood or expectations.

Des herself does not fully subscribe to the cultural stereotype of cognitive deterioration in pregnancy. She does not make simplistic or reductionist assumptions, but simply observes her reactions and speculates on possible causes. Crawley, Dennison and Carter (2003, p72) state that it is known that increased anxiety can impair performance on divided attention tasks and they report higher degree of self-absorption, adding that such focusing of women's attention on themselves might lead to deficits in focused and divided attention which one would expect to be particularly pronounced during pregnancy. They also comment that mild attentional deficit is likely to lead to poorer memory for what is read, accompanied by greater awareness of any slips made.

Soon after the birth, Despina finds it hard to say whether her concentration has improved.

The baby will nearly always wake up while I’m studying. He’s a good sleeper at night, but not during the day. I have not readjusted to the [study] process. I’m trying to set things up so that he’s self-sufficient, but it’s not always easy. I can’t get the three hour blocks as before. No longer than 30 minutes.

Both Emma and Des refer to the effects of tiredness associated with pregnancy.

MG. Do you know what you are having?
Emma. I think it’s a girl. I’m not a girlie girl, I’m a jeans and a short girl and I’ve got an overwhelming desire to buy girlie things. I need to find out. I need to squash my desires about pretty things or go and buy them.

In the second interview, with five months to go, Emma describes herself as:

Still in that space where physically you don’t even look like you’re pregnant but you’re still extremely tired, although I haven’t got an excuse to be tired yet.

The conflict between the actual and the desired identity emerge. The effects of pregnancy get in the way of achieving one’s ideal identity.

It’s just from being hormonal. It’s very hard to get into it [i.e. study] when you’re not quite right. It’s easier to go off and do the washing and the dishes.

She attributes this state or condition to something she calls ‘placental syndrome’ and adds ‘the more kids you have, the dumber you are.’ She was very forgetful in the beginning, not so much with study, but to do with more practical things like not putting out the kids their lunch. At certain time of day, she felt just couldn’t get her head around ‘all this’ but the next day it all just clicked.

When my minds in the right place, I didn’t have any trouble and I got good grades. Study is not too bad, it’s everything around the edges that pulls me down.
Such as moving house. But now actually I have time to sit. When you’re pregnant, you just have to go along with it all.

She normally works at night time, but now she is pregnant, she just goes to bed.

*The pre-occupation with body image.* The relationship of emotionality and identity to the *bios* is also reflected in Pat’s story and demonstrates other ways in which identity is socially constructed producing guilt, anxiety and dissatisfaction. This story relates to the preoccupation with body shape, ‘writing on the body’ and symbolic interactionism.

Asked by the interviewer if there are any other changes in the way she will structure her work in the future she replies:

One thing I realised, I’ve got out of condition physically in this sitting on my bum. It felt like my butt was numb. I was either sitting on my bum in front of the computer or sitting on my bum reading or sitting on my bum while writing and I’ve felt like I was always sitting on my bottom and compelled to do it. And during this phase of my holiday, I’ve been conscientiously not trying to read because I want to give my eyes a rest and I’ve been doing a lot of physical exercise.

I feel much more alert and much healthier when I’m doing physical things, plus … my nursing friend was commenting on my frenzied activity and I said listen, I’ll be forty six when I actually hit these patients … and I’ll be so out of condition that they’re going to have to nurse me.

It is clear then, that in spite of her academic success in passing all her units, this in itself has not made Pat feel good about herself and that academic study has actually made her feel worse and made her more tired and exhausted.

Yeah and … my eyes felt they were bleeding every night and they were itching and sore all the time and I felt like I was just going up to Darwin for this hands on experience as a wreck.

*Viral infection and illness.* At one point Pat was also badly affected by a virus, another indication of how the *bios* can intervene.

I had headaches for four or five days and felt washed out. I thought I was on the mend, then ended up with stomach and back cramps followed by gastro and diarrhoea. I thought I was having a miscarriage. It’s taken a bit longer to recover. I’m just sort of out of whack. I feel distant and out of touch. Just facing the computer to get back in touch is difficult. I find, yeah, the hardest thing for this external thing is that contact is so impersonal when you’re so used to going up and getting a response. Having to put the pressure on yourself [laughter] to make your needs a priority, like I was out all weekend running after sport all that sort of stuff, leaving the washing and the dishes alone and actually sitting down and
doing your study, that was the hardest thing in the beginning, then I was tired and a bit seedy with being pregnant. Then I got sick so it’s thrown me and I just have to recover.

Earlier self-defining memories. In a later interview, Emma reveals a complicating history surrounding a previous pregnancy. The anecdote remind us how earlier memories of the bios can determine subsequent outcomes.

Another hiccup in the middle of all this bloody stuff, because my second one had shoulder dysplasia, he was extremely big, I went to the local birthing centre, and because I’m big on avoiding doctors, at 31 weeks I found I was ineligible for treatment so I began this big educational merry-go-round trying to find out the risk factors [of the same thing happening again]. I got myself a G.P. who’s playing my game, not one who’s scalpel happy. He deals with high-risk pregnancies but you have to check with the midwives that the doctor’s attitude and information is on a par. He says there’s only a 13% chance of a reoccurrence of the same problem.

The centrality of the life space

We have already seen the importance of the life-space in Dylan’s story of having to adjust his work habits to those of his partner. For Poppy, the life-space offers her a source of escape when she feels irritated. Part of her stress management routine is to go out onto the golf course that she lives alongside where she could find space for other things. During the telephone interviews one could pick up the sounds of birds in the background, the helicopters flying over head, and the noise from the adjacent cricket fields.

Despina has a somewhat similar experience although in her case she feels disappointed she could not create the ‘social space’ she yearned for. The move to Queensland from Darwin has been a very disruptive time and she feels she is falling even further behind. Despina came to the Sunshine Coast with her partner to be with family for the arrival of the baby. They live in a rented house which is a transportable home. They chose one very reminiscent of Darwin with a balcony, a large open space and built mainly of wood. But having had to leave a lot of stuff up there in Darwin, she finds it ‘a bit barren still… very functional… not personalised.’

When I first set up my study space, I decided to put the computer in the living room so I wouldn’t be cut off from my partner. I’ve always resented that, like my dad and my step-mother. My dad taught me well! They locked themselves away. Removed themselves from the family. I always find that disturbing. I wanted to create a study space but it didn’t work. Conversation’s OK, but you don’t put the telly on. I really tried. In the end, I got a second computer and set it up in the spare room, and that has worked. Guess that’s something I’ve learned about myself. I had this ideal thing that I could study in a social space. And then of course realised it doesn’t work for me. I’m quite disappointed to have to admit that.
Poppy describes herself as a ‘non-clutter’ person. In describing her life space, she identifies the long rectangular dining table for eight.

The only things I would have on it are my books and maybe two laptops. There’s a wooden buffet, printer and telephone … And a pin board with highlighted due dates, ticked off when it’s sent. And a diary! There’s a big Van Gogh and a couple of Waterhouses on the walls. Basically, I’m a non-clutter person, but it’s very hard with the toddler to have non-clutter.

Rebecca’s description of her life space has her standing in front of the fireplace with two clothes horses with clothes drying and one gets feeling of warmth and familiarity.

Next to the fire we’ve got the wood and the dogs’ bed. There’s a balcony on my right. We’ve four dogs, babysitting two. There’s a veranda with TV. The carpets need vacuuming. I’m facing beautiful limited edition prints: three kookaburras. Absolutely gorgeous. Photographs of the Yarra. A beautiful garden setting. Open plan living in a three tiered home, our own study with pool table. We’ve got a little bit of junk!

This environment provides her with a sense of security, domesticity, comfortability and belongingness. Chris enjoys the same sense of belonging even though it might be temporary and the degree of comfort is not comparable. She lives in a shed with her husband which they are busy renovating.

We’ve got a bit of an office, and it’s going to be rumpus room. We didn’t come here to stay. We were just passing through and just wanted something to come back to after travelling around in a van for four years. We are making it liveable. When we started off we built a big shed with one room and a little room off. There are 3 roller doors which provide a through-breeze. You get a good breeze even in the heat but it gets up to $500 for power in the build up. The awning is in colour bond steel. It’s enclosed on one side and that’s where were making an office. The bedrooms are air-conditioned. We built them last year. That’s why I study in my bedroom. In the wet, we get lots of insects. You can’t use the computer at night because of the bugs. It’s pretty good really. We’ve got a big calendar on the wall, laminated A4 pages, like a whiteboard. I put my formulas and things on there. All the main points of writing an essay. There are lots of photographs on the wall, mainly of when we came here because we came here with nothing.

It is ironic that one of the things Chris had to do without was having a garden, although as we have seen by the end of the interviews this had been rectified.

The importance of the life-space and our connection with place is well established in these stories. It can be a source of tension or a source of comfort. Establishing a ‘right’ relationship with place is paramount. Where the life-space is shared, adjustments have to
be made. These do not necessarily impair study but the can provide an irritation and a sense of unease. The sheer material conditions of life can impact upon the ability to study uninterrupted.

**The role of the tutor**

I have analysed the role of the tutor in online courses elsewhere (Grenfell, 2005A) but in that work I did not examine the way tutors relate to the emotional needs of their students or the way in which they try to hold emotion and cognition separate. The interventionist role of the tutor in assisting students to manage their emotional lives is clearly demonstrated in some of the stories. Pat’s story is particularly revealing and demonstrates the importance of dialogue and negotiation in identity construction (Weber, 2005).

Pat’s cultural capital and understanding of the University is very limited and she relates an incident which at first sight reveals the University and its agents exercising power in an unhelpful, dismissive and potentially threatening manner. One of the units that Pat was undertaking online incorporated several mini-tests or quizzes. Having begun the first mini-test, Pat realized she needed to do some additional research and she logged out of Learnline. Unfortunately she found that she was unable to get back in and kept receiving a message that she had already completed the test.

So, I contacted the lecturer and she said ‘Well, this isn’t the place to discuss it, you need to call me but you’ve already, you were warned’ [in the Study Guide about what would happen before commencing the test]. And, [says Pat] from what I understand, well, bad luck.

At the time of the interview Pat hadn’t received ‘the full story’ from the lecturer. ‘I’m not going to make a big deal about it but I didn’t feel very satisfied with that kind of response.’ In a subsequent interview we discover that the matter was resolved very quickly, after a subsequent call to the lecturer whose tone was ‘distinctly different’. Nevertheless the initial response encouraged Pat to imagine the worst: ‘She’ [the lecturer] ‘probably just wanted to, you know work out why was I actually, you know had I attempted to do it and just wanted another shot.’

In this case the tutor was responsive and reassessed the situation. This same adaptability and flexibility is apparent in a subsequent learning event when Pat submitted an assignment in which she had not completely done what was requested. In the next extract we see the tutor engaging the student in ‘mindful identity negotiation’ (Ting-Toomey in Weber, 2005), and exploring her learning with her.

As part of her studies in SID175, Pat was required to observe a live dissection of a heart presented on video and then write up a report. She found this strange because she had not carried out the dissection herself and the dissection involved only the right side of the heart so she went ahead and brought two sheep complete with heart and lungs, and liver and trachea and did her own dissection in her kitchen.
Pat So I called the lecturer and she rang me back very kindly and we had a discussion about what I was supposed to do, and then I got a knot in my stomach and said ‘so what you’re telling me is I can dump and destroy all the information that I’ve got now and I’ve been working on, just get rid of that and go back to scratch again?’

GS And?

Pat And she said tell me what you’ve got and … what I’d done, and she said no, that’s fine, leave it like that.

GS That’s nice. I mean, something positive came out of it.

Pat It was a relief and her question was have you learnt, do you feel as though you’ve learnt a lot. And I said yes, I have, and she was really pleased. She said that’s the whole purpose of the thing is to actually get you the knowledge about the heart with a lot of, yeah; you’ve experienced something now that was suggested and you’ve carried it through. But I do, I felt, I never would have imagined what a trachea looked like and I’ve seen one of those, and the liver, I absolutely was amazed at how large it was in comparison with the lungs and the heart; and how beautifully like puppy’s ears the lungs feel; and the little cartilage pieces in the lungs, the little … And yeah, so I gained a lot and did finish my lab report and she did give me a bit of an extension so I could finalise it.

GS Now, the lab report you did was according to the criteria listed in the requirements, is that correct?

Pat No. It was very out on my own.

GS Okay, so she allowed you to do that, then?

Pat Yes.

GS Within your actual formal report that you submitted?

Pat Yes, which was roughly, I just made it so that it conformed more to what she was asking around the other one, but I was using mine as my basis. Yeah.

GS Okay, and so having been in a state of tizz because you thought you’d gone off on a tangent, it’s actually come back to being sort of okay, is that right?

Pat Very pleased, yes. So I’ve gone from feeling rock bottom and oh my God this is just, this is pathetic, she’s given us so much instruction here and I’ve got so lost, I’ve done so much work and I was just very confused and very up tight with myself. Yes, and going from a flat lining to feeling woo-hoo.

GS You were confused and upset with yourself because you thought you’d failed to link the requirements as per the instructions, correct?

Pat Yes.

GS But as it turned out, from what you said to me just now, you actually learnt a great deal and the lecturer concerned recognised that and allowed you to actually submit evidence of that learning, and has recognised it in a way. Is that correct?

Pat explained the apprehension she felt and her confusion arising from ‘this external experience’.
Pat See, internally, people can sit in the lecture room and have someone speak with them and they have other students there that they can compare their notes and compare their work with. We all don’t have that. We’re at the, you know, flying blind really until we get those results back and okay, yeah, big relief and we know we’re on the right track; and from those discussion groups I am getting that feeling, that there’s people like myself. There’s other ones that seem more confident and they seem to have been perhaps doing study previously.

GS Right. So is that not encouraging you, then, hearing their stories and their comments

Pat Yeah, it makes me feel as if I’m among, it’s a similar feeling that it’s also, it just makes me think I need to stop giving myself too much of a hard time and just get on with the, you know, one foot in front of the other.

Her sense of personal identity and self-understanding is such that she is able to admit that is something that I can have a tendency to do, is to throw myself too deeply in and not pull up with boundaries, which is where I think guidance from a lecturer certainly helps; because I can get myself so carried away, and dive in there and completely surround myself. While this dissection was going on I didn’t want to be bothered by anybody; I was really cheesed off and annoyed that the children kept on coming into my home and passing comment about what a gross person I was… I can go right into something without knowing that it’s … my expectation on myself is to take it too far, and I’m only a first year student and sometimes you need to know when to pull up the reins and you don’t have to go that in depth.

The effects of a lack of dialogue and negotiation with a tutor can be seen in Susan’s experience in one of her units which incorporated collaborative writing online. Susan described the way in which the group fragments and the contributory role played by the tutor.

[This other student] was meant to e-mail [her contribution] to me and she never did it. She was going to Alice Springs and I was in Adelaide and I never received it at all. I get back to Darwin and try to contact her and she’s still in Alice Springs. The other members of the group were being unresponsive. Then I received an e-mail from one of the members saying he’d got us an extension for a few weeks because he had a computer failure and couldn’t finalise it all. I thought OK, that’s cool. But there was no note from tutor saying that’s OK. And then, at five o’clock this afternoon Donna rings and says ‘I’ve rung up the tutor and I’ve told him were not working together good as a group… and he’s letting me submit mine by myself. We’ve done all this work together why should … How are you expected to get a good grade when you go away all the time?’ I’d been away once. I was a bit upset because I thought I was participating well in the group and doing everything I could.
Me and her were at least working together well, but the way she painted it to the tutor, well … The next day I e-mailed him to ask him what was going on, and that some of the claims that she made were incorrect and asked him what he wanted me to do about my part of the assignment. That was week 10 and were now up to week 13, so I e-mailed the course coordinator and he said he’d give him a shake up. I spoke to one of the members in the group and he said we’d got an extension and could have as long as we liked. I had my section up from middle of April with attachments to everyone else. It’s making me struggle to write my last assignment by myself, and I’m probably going to fail because I haven’t got anything back.

Frankie’s account of the feedback she received in her science subjects confirms the limited interaction with lecturers.

I wish there could have been more [feedback and interaction], but it seems a little… not difficult to organise… It would have been nice…to have somebody you know, go over things and talk about things and review things, like having a little study group type thing. That would have been very helpful. And a chat, like …if there’s the, you know, repetition and memory and all that stuff, whereas if you’ve got your nose in a book it can be very dry. And to be able to bounce things off everybody else…

These comments suggest that the University relies on students to be self-directed learners and to be self-contained. Notwithstanding the fact that Frankie places undue reliance on repetition and memory, the tutors have done little to intervene to foster a social presence and assist Frankie who has a very limited stock of academic capital to actually engage with others.

When the engagement does take place, it does so at the end of the course when she shares some of the resources from her final assignment for CUC100 with a student who appealed for help by e-mail, but neither of them engages in discussion or get deeper into the materials.

The amount of feedback and interaction appears to have no bearing on final outcomes. For example Frankie who is learning to become a self-directed learner and more self-reliant achieves HDs in both her units.

**Implications for our practice**

Given that social presence remains an amorphous concept, this section looks at the implications for the current research on our practice as educators bearing in mind that this was a self-selected group of mature-age learners working separately and in isolation from each other. The stories suggest the following:

- Re-establish and acknowledge the role of the emotions in influencing cognition and attainment, so that emotional literacy becomes a prime focus of our work.
• Strengthen the interactional and interventionist role of the tutor. Tutors need to engage students in ‘mindful identity negotiation’ and equip students with identity resources. For example, tutors need to confirm with students the importance of maintaining positive flow.

• Recognise that social presence by itself is not going to be sufficient. It is not going to be compensatory and stand in for lack of teaching presence or cognitive presence. At the same time, tutors need to develop social and cultural capital to ensure student success. (Thomas, 2002)

• Recognise the limitations of an approach which assumes that extensive networking will result from simply being online and participating in the ubiquitous discussion board.

• Accept that social presence is difficult to create and maintain in situations where social support is not forthcoming from family or ones partner.

• Acknowledge the demands and responsibilities that friendship brings and the disadvantages this can bring to study.

• Promote informal learning strategies involving family and friends, work colleagues and others.

• Take into account the workings of the bios in our interactions with students and demonstrate empathy with them.

• Look more closely at the way that work (or paid employment) can interfere with or reinforce learning.

Finally, the current research into emotions and cognition comprises a 'testimonial reading' in the sense used by Boler (1999, p166). The purpose of such research is not simply for us to empathize with students, but to collect testimony to change the way lecturers and tutors online interact and dialogue with students whilst acknowledging our own complicity and 'accept[ing] responsibility as a co-producer of truth'. Whilst the traumas and oppression we are dealing with here are not in the same category as the holocaust which Boler addresses, we are nevertheless obtaining testimony of the way in which power, authority and control are exercised by the University. If we can understand the student experience as one of trauma, those involved in working online might attend more carefully to what is occurring. We should not simply be reporting but attempting to get 'action' and the promise of redress.
REFERENCES


