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COMMUNICATION AND MEANING:

THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE OF OFF-CAMPUS STUDY

by

Margaret Grace, B.A., M.A.(Qual.) University of Queensland

A thesis is submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Education, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia.

July, 1991
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

CANDIDATE'S CERTIFICATE

I certify that the thesis entitled: Communication and Meaning: The First Year Experience of Off-campus Study, and submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis (or any part of the same) has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis with gratitude to the off-campus students who participated in the research which it reports, and with affection to my grandchild, David Alexander Olley.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Deakin University and Monash University College Gippsland for supporting and facilitating my research. The progress of the thesis has been greatly assisted by the award in January 1990 of a Deakin University Postgraduate Research Scholarship which enabled me to complete my candidature as a full-time off-campus student.

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## CONTENTS

### Chapter 1  INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purposes of the study
1.2 The context of the study: distance education
1.2.1 The invisibility of off-campus students
1.2.2 Existing research about off-campus students

### Chapter 2  THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND PROJECT

2.1 Introduction
2.2 Distance education and the mainstream
2.3 How distance educators theorise their practice
2.4 The formulation and significance of the research problem
2.5 The research project

### Chapter 3  THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND ISSUES

3.1 Introduction
3.2 Philosophical traditions and research paradigms
3.2.1 The interpretive position relative to this project
3.2.2 Feminist research and theory
3.2.2.1 Knowledge as a social construct - a feminist perspective
3.2.2.2 Towards a feminist paradigm?
3.3 The conceptual power of hermeneutics
3.3.1 Subject - object duality
3.3.2 Meaning
3.3.2.1 Life histories and meaning frameworks
3.3.2.2 Meaning in the social sciences
3.4 Application of the concept of culture to the context of distance education
3.4.1 The acquisition and transmission of culture
3.4.2 Culture and structure
3.4.3 Distance education as a cultural phenomenon of modernity
3.4.4 Institutional cultures
3.4.5 Socialisation and enculturation
6.2.1 Anticipatory socialisation 104
6.2.1.1 Expectancy 105
6.2.1.2 Confidence, anxiety and guilt 107
6.2.2 Action during anticipatory socialisation 115
6.2.2.1 Information gathering 115
6.2.2.2 Interpreting the institution's cultural artefacts 119
6.2.2.3 Knowing and not knowing 121
6.2.2.4 Waiting and wanting to get started 122
6.2.3 Encounter 125
6.2.3.1 The positive value of peers 126
6.2.3.2 Communication via the printed word 127
6.2.3.3 Surprise and sense-making 129
6.2.3.4 Continuing self-assessment 130

Chapter 7 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA: WITHDRAWAL OR COMMITMENT 135

7.1 Withdrawal 135
7.1.1 The circumstances of withdrawal 135
7.1.2 The experience of withdrawal 136
7.2 Integration and adjustment 139
7.2.1 Degrees of marginality and isolation 140
7.2.2 The content and methods of learning to be an off-campus student 144
7.2.2.1 The assignment as an arena for negotiation of meanings 145
7.2.2.2 Variations in the development of relationships 151
7.2.3 Negotiation of definitions of knowledge and learning 156
7.2.3.1 Congruent definitions 157
7.2.3.2 Disillusionment 159
7.2.3.3 Maintaining Distance 160
7.2.3.4 The influence of gender on students' definitions of knowing and learning 161
7.2.4 The world of the student 164
7.2.4.1 Negotiating realities 165
7.2.4.2 Making adjustments 166
7.2.4.3 Self-initiated learning agendas 171
7.2.4.4 Integrating study into the personal context 174
SUMMARY

The substantive field of the thesis is the sociology of distance education. The issues investigated centre on the relationship between off-campus students and the institutions of higher education with which they enrol, in which the first year experience is construed as an encounter between the students' personal contexts and institutional cultures. A theoretical framework is constructed which synthesises elements of phenomenology, hermeneutics and feminist theory.

The author reports research into the way a small sample of people experienced off-campus study. The students selected resided in Victoria, Australia, and were enrolled with one of two Victorian tertiary institutions: the (then) Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education and Deakin University. Using a case study approach, the subjective experiences of the students were studied by means of a series of interviews which took place at their homes or places of employment in the period January 1988 to November 1989.

Methodological issues relating to the application of hermeneutic principles to the use of interviews in educational research are explored. The results of the interpretation of the interview material are presented in terms of an interactionist model of socialisation. The thesis argued is that certain theoretical and practical issues in distance education are best understood as social and cultural phenomena rather than as technical problems. The implications of the findings about the effects of gender and culture on student experience are discussed in relation to the issues of access and equity, student support, and models of teaching and learning.
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purposes of the study

This thesis reports on research in the field of distance education undertaken in Victoria, Australia, the specific aims of which are set out in Chapter 2. The author's intention is firstly, by adopting a student-centred and gender-conscious perspective, to make visible the experience of people who undertake higher education by off-campus study. Secondly, the thesis aims to restore the category of 'meaning', as a subject for investigation and debate, to an educational discourse which has to date been largely concerned with technical matters.

The students whose experience in the years 1988 and 1989 is documented herein were residents of the State of Victoria, and were enrolled with one of two regional tertiary institutions: the Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education and Deakin University. These institutions both provided for on-campus as well as off-campus students, but in each case, commitment to distance education was a major component of the overall institutional mandate. The Institute was established in 1968, and the University in 1977. In 1988 the two institutions enrolled approximately 2,500 and 4,500 off-campus students respectively. In 1990, as a result of an amalgamation with Monash University, the Institute became Monash University College Gippsland. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the institutional title used is that pertaining at the time the research was undertaken.

While each of these institutions had an important regional identity, their off-campus student populations were dispersed all over Victoria and beyond. In broad terms, the report of research presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 is an attempt to tell the stories of some of those students in such a way as to discover some generalisable principles, while retaining the specificity of their individual experiences. With Knefelkamp (1987), the author believes that:

If we want education to be transformative, it has to begin with the student. It has to begin with their voice. It has to begin, not with our lecture, or our didactics, but with their story and their story well told and heard (Knefelkamp, 1987, 10-11 original emphasis).

With respect to the aim of restoring the subject of meaning to the discourse of distance education, an interest in the problematics of the interpretation of meaning consistently informs the approach taken to both substantive and methodological aspects of the work.
In his dissertation on positivism and hermeneutics in the social sciences: *Paradigms, Science and Reality*, Lindholm (1981) argues that as a consequence of accepting an ideal of knowledge borrowed from the natural sciences, meanings have been rendered invisible in the empirical tradition. Similarly after reviewing the development of the history of scientific rationality, Laing (1982) concludes that by definition, meaning lies outside the domain of the investigative competence of empirical science. The consequence is the invisibility of meaning in scientific discourse and the marginalisation of those discourses in which it features.

To the extent that science, or more accurately scientism, has come to comprise a symbolic universe which pervades modern life and, ironically, provides its dominant structures of meaning (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), then the influence of the empirical scientific tradition can be expected to affect many domains, including that of education. Carr and Kemmis (1983) argue that the adoption of positivist approaches to research in the field of education entails the separation of fact from value and of instrumental questions from moral ones. These authors describe the results as reification, atomisation and alienation and maintain that the belief in the explanatory and predictive capacities of such research as a basis for decision-making has been misplaced.

However, there is now a growing body of research, not only in the field of education generally but also to some extent in distance education, which is informed by a deliberate rejection of the ‘natural science paradigm’ and which seeks to explore and establish alternative ways of approaching educational problems (Minnis, 1985). Educationists can now join anthropologist Geertz in saying:

Meaning, that elusive and ill-defined pseudoentity we were once more than content to leave philosophers and literary critics to fumble with, has now come back into the heart of our discipline (Geertz, 1973b, 29).

Because meaning has been largely defined out of educational discourses, it is difficult to find either an appropriate language or an adequate conceptual apparatus with which to treat this subject. In this thesis, hermeneutic phenomenology, the synthesis with modern social theory, of an interpretive tradition long used in literature, history, and religion, provides the conceptual vehicle which enables the restoration of meaning to the discourse.

1.2 The context of the study: distance education

Instead of attending a university or college campus for lectures, tutorials, use of libraries, and leisure activities, off-campus students typically study at home, receiving
by post printed materials which take the place of lectures and tutorials. These materials may be part of a comprehensive learning ‘package’ which may include a postal library service, audio and video recordings, radio and television broadcasting or computer packages. Communication between the student and the campus may occur by post, telephone, and increasingly, where the technology is available, by facsimile and electronic mail. Periodic attendance either on the campus or at a regional ‘study centre’ may be either required or offered as an optional extra.

In this thesis the terms ‘off-campus’, ‘distant’ and ‘distance’ are used to designate such students, unless another term such as ‘external’ or ‘extramural’ is the one commonly adopted in the particular context referred to. In accordance with current usage, the term ‘distance education’ is preferred over other terms such as ‘external studies’ and ‘extramural studies’.

The proliferation of distance education in the twentieth century is an accelerating global phenomenon of very considerable magnitude. It developed in the United States and in Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand to meet the educational needs of dispersed populations of European settlers (Bolton, 1986). In the post-colonial era distance education systems have multiplied in the South Pacific, Asia, Africa and South America. In the Soviet Union, provision of correspondence courses dates from 1923, while in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe this form of education developed rapidly after the second world war. In other European countries, distance education initiatives have expanded in the latter part of the twentieth century in response to needs for the continuing education of adults. In China distance education methods have been used to teach a generation whose education was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution (Rumble, 1989, 90).

The UK Open University, an autonomous national institution which specialises in distance education, has been an influential model in this rapidly expanding field of educational endeavour. Its establishment in 1971 was followed by the Tele-Universite of Quebec (1972) and Athabasca University (1973) in Canada, the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia in Spain (1974), the FernUniversitat of West Germany (1975), Everyman’s University, Israel (1976), the Open Learning Institute, British Columbia (1979), the Dutch Open University (1984) and the University of the Air in Japan (1985) (Anwyl et al., 1987, 1). Other new distance teaching universities founded in the late 1970’s and 1980’s are the Universidad Nacional Abierta, Venezuela, the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand, the Indira Ghandi Open University, India and the Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia.
Very significant numbers of people now take advantage of the opportunities created by this form of educational provision. The following statistics, while not comprehensive, give some indication of the magnitude of such student populations. By 1981, 86,000 people were enrolled with the UK Open University, and 36,000 with the Fernuniversität in West Germany (Rumble and Harry, 1982). Gupta (1990) estimates that in India, 9% of the total university population was served by distance education in 1986-87, and projects a likely increase to 24% by the year 2000. The enrolment of the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University exceeds 200,000 (Carr, 1990). In Japan the enrolment is in excess of 300,000 (Hisano, 1989), while in Tanzania the National Correspondence Institute has provided learning opportunities at secondary school level for more than 50,000 people, many of them adults (Muro, 1988). According to the 1991 edition of the Directory of Tertiary External Courses in Australia, the total number of off-campus students in this country in 1990 exceeded 100,000, a figure which includes the Technical and Further Education sector.

1.2.1 The invisibility of off-campus students

Although off-campus study is becoming quite a common experience in many parts of the world, off-campus student populations tend to remain largely invisible, owing to their physical dispersal and the privatisation of the student experience which this mode of learning entails. In Australia, distance education is typically conducted by ‘mixed-mode’ institutions which have two populations of students: the ‘internal’ students who attend the campus in the traditional way, and the ‘external’ or ‘off-campus’ students who are served by distance education delivery systems. Unless compulsory residential schools are part of an institution’s distance education policy, its off-campus students may never have any appreciable group presence on the campus. In such a situation, the needs and characteristics of the students present on campus are more likely to impinge on the awareness of staff than are those of their distant and invisible counterparts.

If the off-campus students comprise a small proportion of a student population, distance teaching does not constitute a major part of the institutional commitment and the tendency for external students to be ‘out of sight, out of mind’ is exacerbated. Even in those institutions which have a major or total commitment to distance education, the separation of functions which is a consequence of the production and servicing of courses in large scale distance education systems tends to increase the social distance between staff and students (Harris, 1987).

The invisibility of off-campus students extends to the wider community. Unless they meet at local study centres for purposes associated with their study, off-campus
students tend not to identify themselves as such in social gatherings. Moreover, the common perception of 'external' or 'correspondence' study as a second-class form of education means that public figures are seldom identified as graduates of distance education systems. The invisibility of the off-campus student is doubly compounded by gender. Firstly, the conceptual invisibility of women in education in general pertains in distance education (Grace, 1991). Briefly, the feminist argument is that even though women and girls now participate in education both as teachers and learners, education systems embody a male-centred world view because historically women have been excluded from the processes of the construction and codification of knowledge. The practices of treating the male as the norm, and of failing to recognise the distinct character of female experience effectively render women invisible in much scholarship and in educational discourses in particular (Porter, 1986; Spender, 1981b; 1982). Secondly, it has been suggested (Faith and Coulter, 1988) that distance education serves to reproduce the 'ghettoisation' of women in the domestic sphere, thereby contributing to their invisibility in the world at large.

Androcentricty is very pronounced in the field of distance education. Whereas considerable interest in gender issues is evident in the field of education generally, gender is rarely treated as problematic in the discourses of distance education. Even when gender surfaces as an aspect of other issues such as recruitment, participation, retention, performance and graduate careers the significance of gender differences is seldom fully appreciated or even explored (von Prummer, 1987, 23). Research results tend not to be analysed in terms of gender, curriculum and pedagogy reflect dominant masculinist assumptions, and the specific implications for women of various practices are not analysed (Evans and Grace, 1990; Faith, 1988b; Grace, 1991). The publication of a volume (Faith, ed., 1988a), in which women working in distance education in various parts of the world explore gender issues, has been likened to lighting a candle in the dark (Burge, 1988b).

The significance of such androcentricty is magnified when one considers the gender imbalance between participation and decision-making power in this field. Game (1991, 11) reports that while women comprise approximately 75% of all those who participate in distance education, whether as teachers or students, 90% of 'control over distance education programs and activities' is vested in men. Failure even to appreciate the significance of gender has many unfortunate consequences. Drawing attention to the fact that the majority of off-campus students of Massey University are women, Tremaine and Owen (1984, 46) estimate that 'one in every 25 New Zealand women is or has been an extramural student'. Not only has the actual or potential impact of this phenomenon on New Zealand society apparently been ignored, but, according to
Tremaine and Owen, the preponderence of women studying had, to that date, little influence on the academic curriculum.

1.2.2 Existing research about off-campus students

Considerable research has been undertaken, and knowledge shared, discussed and debated in the literature and at conferences and workshops. Indeed, Calvert (1989) says that for the very reason that learners are not present in the classroom, distance educators are likely to focus on the characteristics of their students. She sums up and critiques the body of knowledge thus accumulated as follows:

Demographic reports permit comparison of student populations with institutional objectives on general characteristics such as region of residence, age, occupation and educational background. Surveys probe for student perceptions of study problems, program quality and reasons for dropout. However, though this type of work is recognised as essential for institutional management, there is growing criticism of its usefulness for a real understanding of students (Calvert, 1989, 41).

The shortcoming of this body of scholarship in terms of its ability to yield a 'real understanding' of students can be attributed to the fact that it is propelled by a diversity of interests, each operating to some extent in a different conceptual framework: the interests of policy makers in demographic characteristics of actual and potential student clienteles; the interests of management in cost efficiency and educational effectiveness; the interests in learning theory of those who prepare educational materials and those who work as tutors; the interests of counsellors in psychology, including the psychology of learning.

The effect of specific interests on the kinds of information sought and the ways in which such information is conceptualised is a kind of dismemberment of the student as a conceptual entity. The interests of policy makers and managers tend to result in the reduction of the person to a unit in a demographic category, such as male, female, teacher, or resident of a certain place, a reduction which conceptually strips the student of the complexities of individual personality. Research and theorisation propelled by the interests of educational technologists, course developers and counsellors has resulted in a body of knowledge which suffers from a conceptual compartmentalisation which effectively dissects the student by separating thinking from feeling, and by abstracting qualities from the context of the whole person.

Salmon (1980) argues that the separate development of educational and clinical psychology has resulted in an artificial separation of cognition and affect. Educational
psychology has been concerned with thinking, remembering and acquisition of skills almost to the exclusion of the emotional aspects of learning. Conversely, clinical psychology tends to concentrate on the power of feelings and neglect the cognitive as an aspect of the personal. Salmon criticises the psychology of learning and instruction as essentially impersonal and generalised, taking little or no account of the personal and social contexts of the learner, or of the tacit knowledge which learners bring to an educational endeavour. This artificial compartmentalisation has far-reaching consequences:

All these features in the official expertise about education are, of course, implemented in the ways in which educational institutions are run. The separation of educational content from personal experience, the authoritarian relationships, the passive role of the learner, the neglect of feeling, the non-acknowledgment of alternative views - all these much-criticised aspects of schools and other places of learning can be seen to derive from the conventional psychology of how people learn (Salmon, 1980, 6-7).

According to Salmon, the distinction between cognition and affect can be blurred by conceiving of learners as knowers. This would involve acknowledgment of what individuals bring to the learning situation and respect for their attributes towards agency and communion. A similar position is reached by Belenky and colleagues (1986), a group of psychologists who interviewed 135 American women about what was important for them about life and learning. These researchers theorised their findings in terms of a concept of women as knowers, concluding that women's self concepts and ways of knowing are inextricably intertwined.

As Calvert (1989) notes, there have been a number of attempts in the field of distance education to move beyond psycho-metric approaches to research about students. Some of this research has been influenced by the extension to the field of education of philosophical debate in the social sciences (Carr and Kemmis, 1983). Another influence is the body of phenomenological research conducted by Marton and colleagues in Sweden (1979; 1982; 1983) and associated approaches taken by educationists in Britain (Marton et al., 1984). At the UK Open University a small team of researchers which became known as the Study Methods Group (Gibbs et al., 1982a; Morgan et al., 1982; Taylor et al., 1981) applied and extended these approaches in the field of distance education. This work is based on a recognition of the relationship between learning and the context in which it occurs, and aims to produce descriptions of learning from the learner's perspective (Morgan, 1984).
These initiatives have generated some interest in Australia and have influenced the work of several researchers (Evans, 1987; Holt et al., 1990; Inglis, 1987; 1989; Kelly and Shapcott (Grace) 1987; Nation, 1985; 1987; Parer, 1988). However, reviewing the trends internationally, Morgan (1990) contends that the 'silent revolution' from positivist to qualitative, illuminative and critical research approaches occurring in other fields of education is scarcely discernible in distance education.

The aspirations of the Swedish and British researchers mentioned above are expressed in the title of a paper published in 1982 by Morgan, Taylor and Gibbs: 'Understanding the Distance Learner as a Whole Person'. This thesis may be understood as an attempt to make further progress towards the achievement of that aspiration. It is both an advance upon and a departure from other work in the field. It is an advance in that the attempt to understand is framed in terms of sociological and feminist theory, and a departure in that students are conceived of as knowers in the holistic sense adopted by Belenky et al. and Salmon (above). Specifically, the experience of distance education is examined in the context of students' personal, social, mental and emotional milieux.
CHAPTER 2 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND PROJECT

2.1 Introduction

In focusing on the students' experiences of distance education, this study engages with issues surrounding the relationship between educational institutions and their students. Communication and interaction are central issues in the discourses of distance education since they raise questions about the nature and quality of teaching and learning, and have been extensively debated (Daniel and Marquis, 1979; Evans and Nation, 1989a; 1989b; Holmberg, 1980; Northedge, 1987; 1988; Peters, 1971; 1989; Sewart, 1981; 1982). The issues identified in these debates can be seen as responses to problems arising from the basic configuration of the institutional and social milieu of the learning experience. In the main, these responses have not been expressed in sociological terms. In this thesis a theoretical perspective derived from interactionist sociology, cultural anthropology and feminist critique is used to illuminate and extend the current understanding of such issues.

The conception of the research project on which the thesis reports was generated in the author's experience as a liaison officer for external students at the University of Queensland, a position established by off-campus students and funded by the Student Union. The experience of being an intermediary between off-campus students, academic and support staff, and the university bureaucracy produced an awareness of the combined effects of the social isolation of these students and the complexity of the university culture. Subsequent professional experience in the Institute of Distance Education at Deakin University and the experience of being an off-campus postgraduate student provided different, but complementary perspectives.

A number of unresolved questions were generated in the course of the liaison officer experience (Grace, 1989) and later a working hypothesis was formed that these questions could best be framed in terms of a theory of socialisation. The substantive issues arose in the context of responding to students' enquiries and assisting in the resolution of problems. It became apparent that the students were lacking not only in information but also in specific knowledge frameworks with which to interpret the communications they received. Language in itself constituted a problem. The encounter with unfamiliar terminology which had meanings specific to the university context could be alienating, and in some cases this inhibited students from initiating contact with staff when they needed help. Further, the advocacy work undertaken on behalf of students was an education in the politics of their situation. Students needed interpretation of the university culture to be available through a variety of communication channels.
Another outcome of my encounters with students in the course of this work was an increasing respect for the integrity of their processes, and curiosity about their personal contexts. Tours of the state undertaken to visit students at regional Study Centres produced refreshing insights into the differences between the culture of the campus and the social contexts of the more remote students. I also had intimations that there were complex personal dimensions of the student experience which might help to explain students’ motivations and their persistence in overcoming the difficulties entailed in off-campus study.

The exploration of such matters called for special research. A project undertaken in 1983 with a colleague (Kelly and Shapcott (Grace), 1987) to investigate students’ approaches to assignment work raised a number of interesting issues and resulted in a decision to reflect critically on the methodology of interviewing in subsequent research.

This professional experience constitutes the substantive context in which the research problem was generated. The following sections introduce the conceptual context within which the problem is formulated. In order to appreciate the configuration of social relationships in Australian distance education settings and the relevance of socialisation theory, it is necessary first to understand the context of the development of distance education in relation to other more conventional forms of education. In the following sections, this context is explained, its relevance to the research problem indicated, and then the main contributions to the existing theoretical debates and the ways in which they have been framed to date are briefly outlined.

2.2 Distance education and the mainstream

The adoption in 1982 of the term ‘distance education’ by the 12th world conference of the International Council for Correspondence Education, which thereafter designated itself the International Council for Distance Education, was an attempt at redefinition which signalled a perceived transition from the status of surrogate to that of specialist. At institutions such as the University of London, the University of Queensland and Massey University in New Zealand, the practice of admitting external students originally constituted little more than a waiving of the regulations in respect to some people, who were excused from attendance at lectures and tutorials, but permitted to present themselves for examination. In such circumstances any services provided for such people were assumed to be substitutes for the ‘real thing’. The legacy of such beginnings was the persistence, in spite of the increasing sophistication of such services, of an attitude of surrogacy towards external or off-campus provision (Speer, 1986; Stanford, 1981). This attitude was most prevalent in the ‘dual mode’ institutions.
characteristic of the provision of distance education in Australia. The most significant event in the perceptual transition from surrogate correspondence study to specialist distance education provision was probably the establishment in 1971 of the UK Open University and its subsequent success and high public profile.

A number of attempts have been made by practitioners and theorists to define distance education, a rather unsatisfactory undertaking, since it is phenomenon of diverse manifestations (Baath, 1981; Holmberg, 1980; 1985; Keegan, 1986; Lewis, 1986; Peters, 1971; 1989; Tight, 1988). Keegan's (1986) attempt results in the following list of defining characteristics:

* the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process; this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education.
* the influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services; this distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programs.
* the use of technical media; print, audio, video or computer, to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course.
* the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue; this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education.
* the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialisation purposes (Keegan, 1986, 49).

This list of defining characteristics is indicative of the fact that distance education systems have developed as variants of the established norm, tend to be defined in terms of traditional models, and incorporate basic assumptions and features of those models. Where the curriculum is geared to the attainment of academic awards, the credentialing system ensures that this is so, even in single mode institutions such as the UK Open University (Evans and Nation, 1989a, 239; Harris, 1987, 138). The interest of distance educators in debating the relationship between distance education and 'the mainstream' (Smith and Kelly, 1987), and their propensity to make what Nation (1985) calls 'the inevitable comparison' between their practices and those of more traditional forms of education further attest to this circumstance.

The development of distance education in the context of established education systems but with certain distinguishing features has produced a particular configuration of
social relationships in this educational mode. Keegan (1986) identifies two 'socio-cultural determinants' which he regards as both pre-conditions for and consequences of distance education: the presence of more industrialised features than in conventional forms of education; and the 'privatisation of institutional learning':

The learning group is splintered, and students study, basically at home, through the territory served by the institution. Teaching is focused on the individual student who does not, however, study as a private learner but as a member of an often complex educational bureaucracy (Keegan, 1986, 125).

The privatisation of traditional institutional learning creates forms of social milieux of teaching and learning which are inherently problematic. The basic elements which structure relationships in traditional settings, such as the roles of teacher, student and administrator are retained, but the associated context through which such roles are normally mediated is largely unavailable.

This circumstance has significant practical implications. Failure by either staff or students to appreciate fully the implications of such problematic discrepancies between distance education and the mainstream could contribute in significant ways to the marginality and consequent alienation of students. There is a danger that in the attempt to reproduce or provide innovative alternatives to mainstream educational practice, only selected features are perceived as problematic by distance educators. Aspects of the institutional culture which are taken for granted by, and therefore largely invisible to staff may not be adequately communicated to their off-campus students. Moreover, it has been my experience (Grace, 1989) that such students, being relative outsiders to the culture, are unable to name what they lack, and liable consequently to internalise their difficulties as personal failure.

In the following section it is argued that certain influential theories about teaching and learning in distance education are limited in that they do not give due consideration to these socio-cultural processes, and that this limitation is due to the lack of a sociological perspective. While many of the issues debated in the literature relate to the basic theme of communication, they have been framed variously. In terms of learning theory, debate is about the relative importance of interaction and independence. From the perspective of policy makers, communication becomes a management issue about cost efficiency, or a technical issue about electronics. While these approaches are valid in their own terms, they are inadequate to the extent that the fact that communication is essentially a social and cultural phenomenon is overlooked.
2.3 How distance educators theorise their practice

Peters (1971; 1989) observes the determining influence of the organisational features of distance education and characterises it as a particularly industrialised form of education, a product and manifestation of industrialised society. The implications he draws for social relationships in the learning process are rather chilling. Using the German philosophical Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft distinctions developed by Tonnies, he characterises the relationship between off-campus students and their educational institutions as radically different from that which prevails in the traditional situation. To succeed in an industrialised educational system, the student/consumer must be largely independent and self-reliant. While Peters does not necessarily advocate that the function of interaction in the educative process should be minimised, his analysis of the similarities between distance education systems and industrial processes is compelling and tends to this conclusion. Adult learning theories which propound an ideal of the student as an 'independent' or 'autonomous' learner serve to legitimate this educational model.

Daniel and Marquis (1979) identify the relative values of interaction and independence as a critical issue and approach it from a management perspective, seeking to find a balance between the goals of educational effectiveness and cost-efficiency. Independent learning activities are shown to be attractive to management because they offer the possibility of achieving economies of scale, whereas the cost of interactive activities increases in proportion to the number of students.

Other writers have asserted that interaction and two-way communication are essential constituents of distance education. Holmberg's (1980; 1985) humanistic approach focuses on the development of communicative processes in the teacher-student relationship which he describes ideally as a 'guided didactic conversation'. However, individualism in students is highly valued by Holmberg, and his teacher-centred educational perspective underestimates the relative importance to students of other features of the institutional milieu. Such features are acknowledged by Stewart, who attempted a student-centred view, starting from a point of recognition of the diversity of individuals in student populations and the difficulties of dealing with complex bureaucracies at a distance. Referring to the relationships between other kinds of institutions and their clients, Stewart notes the development of specialist professional roles to mediate between systems and the individual, and argues that a range of support staff are needed to act as 'intermediaries' between individual students and the rest of the institution. This argument demonstrates an awareness of the social dimensions of the student experience not fully appreciated by either Peters or Holmberg, but its persuasive force is limited by the lack of a sociological conceptual framework.
Some recognition of the relevance of sociological theory to problematic aspects of
distance education is suggested in the literature on the phenomenon of student
withdrawal or 'drop-out'. Tinto’s (1975) model of drop-out which was based on
Durkheim’s theory of suicide was applied to distance education by Malley et al. (1976)
and appears in the discussions of this phenomenon by Baath (1980) Roberts (1984) and
Keegan (1986). The fact that each of these authors seizes on the phrase ‘weakly
integrated into the social system of the teaching institution’ to describe the situation of
off-campus students, suggests that the concept of social integration has meaning for
practitioners. However, except for a comparatively small body of writing, some of
which is reviewed below, the distance education literature lacks a socio-cultural
perspective.

A perceptive contribution to the conceptualisation of student support was made by
Meacham (1984). Using an interactionist framework and drawing mainly on Berger
and Luckmann’s (1966) discourse on the social construction of reality, Meacham says:

Distance learners are perpetual strangers to their chosen institutions, they
are largely unaware of the negotiated rules governing student behaviour,
and play a negligible part in the negotiating process. The distance learner
is usually given a set of rules and tasks and is required to make meaning
of them without reference to ‘significant others’ in the form of peers and
authority. Any meanings which emerge are extremely difficult to validate,
as validation is related to individuals rather than underlying structural
controls (Meacham, 1984, 48).

In these circumstances Meacham considers the inability of institutions to offer
appropriate socialising experiences an important deficiency in the education of
off-campus students.

Hughes (1989) brings to the interaction and/or independence debate the perspective of
a cultural anthropologist, arguing that students need to establish an identity within the
institutional culture and observing that group interaction can be a way of doing this:

To most distance students the university is a foreign culture whose ways
they learn most imperfectly. Value systems, behavioural norms and
customs cannot be effectively conveyed merely through course materials.
These are intangibles which individuals learn through interaction or invent
in the absence of real information. The debate of independence versus
interaction in distance education revolves around the issue of the
importance or unimportance of student culture and divides those for whom
distance education represents freedom from involvement in extraneous
activities from those for whom book learning is only an aspect of education (Hughes, 1989, 1).

Northedge (1987; 1988) takes the anthropological perspective to the teaching/learning relationship which involves both staff and students and conceptualises education as the transmission of culture of which an important feature is the student's encounter with unfamiliar 'expert' discourses. Applying this conceptual framework to the circumstances of distance education, he describes the experience of social science foundation year students at the UK Open University as culture shock:

Adults returning to study always find the going exhilarating but tough in the early stages. This can be understood by recognising that they are, in effect, travellers entering a foreign culture with its own language and customs and that they suffer the difficulties of communication and the dislocations of personal identity to which newcomers are always exposed (Northedge, 1987, 161).

2.4 The formulation and significance of the research problem

Using the perceptions of Meacham, Hughes and Northedge, and returning to Keegan's (1986, 125) assertion that although the teaching may be focused on the individual student, the socio-cultural determinants of distance education are such that the individual studies not as a private learner but 'as a member of an often complex educational bureaucracy', it can be seen that Keegan's analysis is useful, but limited. While the encounter with educational bureaucracy is a feature of off-campus study, the student is not a member of the bureaucracy. The situation of the off-campus student can more accurately be described as that of a marginal member of a complex and highly bureaucratised institutional culture.

The content of the cultures of academic institutions includes both formal and informal curricula, and transmission takes place both formally through curriculum and pedagogy, and incidentally through various forms of social interaction. The prestige of institutions which have highly refined cultures suggests that the value of specific institutional cultures is widely recognised. The low prestige of off-campus study may be associated with a perception that the transmission of culture requires the congregation of students on campus over appreciable periods of time, while the assertions of some distance educators (Baath, 1981; Chick, 1981) that learning is essentially a private activity can be interpreted as attempts to discount this factor.

Thus the investigation of communication problems in cultural terms has potential to contribute significantly to debate on the issue of the status of distance education and to
learning theory in this field. Socio-cultural analysis can also illuminate a number of recognised problematic areas in the practice of distance education, such as the phenomenon of ‘drop out’ or ‘withdrawal’ which occurs frequently, especially in the first year of enrolment (Baath, 1982; James and Wadermeyer, 1959; Malley, Brown and Williams, 1976; Roberts, 1984). However, while high attrition rates are a legitimate cause for concern, this research focuses more on the positive counterpart of withdrawal, that is, persistence. Given the difficulties inherent in this mode of study, it is significant that many students persist over considerable periods of time to achieve graduation. What accounts for such persistence?

The specific questions posed are: what meanings does the experience of off-campus study have for adults? How do off-campus students acquire the cultural knowledge necessary for their success? How do they integrate that knowledge into their existing personal and social contexts?

2.5 The research project

To research these questions it was decided to focus on the experience of a small number of people over a period of approximately eighteen months beginning soon after they had applied to enrol and continuing into the start of their second year of study. The initial period of enrolment was chosen for two reasons: in terms of socialisation theory the period of first encounter with a new setting is recognised as crucial for identification with the setting and acquisition of cultural knowledge (Louis, 1980); in terms of the problematics of distance education, the highest rate of student attrition occurs in the first year of enrolment (Roberts, 1984).

With the intention of reaching illuminative understandings rather than establishing causal explanations, the aims of the study were formulated as follows:

* to develop a detailed understanding of some aspects of the experience of a sample of people who were newly enrolled off-campus students;
* to discover the meanings which the student experience held for these people both in terms of personal development and as an encounter with a culturally defined setting;
* to investigate the means by which such meanings are constructed and negotiated;
* to reflect critically on the research process and methodology.
The choice of a case study approach with a small sample of students was occasioned by the wish to study the experience of each person at some depth by means of extended interviews rather than survey a large number. The researcher wished to explore the possibilities of hermeneutic treatment of interview material; was aware of the potential for even a single interview to generate a wealth of information; and was cognisant of the limits to the amount of such data which can be processed by a single researcher in a given amount of time. It was also understood that such a choice raised issues of generalisability and validity, and these issues are addressed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education and Deakin University were chosen as the distance education providers from which to select participant students. These institutions were chosen firstly, because the researcher was resident of the state of Victoria at the time of undertaking the study, and secondly, because it was considered advantageous to draw the participants from institutions which were different in respect that one was a college and the other a university. (To maintain the contextuality of the research findings, the Institute is here referred to as such, although it has since achieved the status of a university college). There were also some interesting differences between the institutions with respect to policy and practices in regard to student support. These differences are discussed below in the context of the presentation of the research data.

Because a case study rather than a survey approach was adopted, statistical representativeness was not required. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to select participants in such a way as to ensure variability in the sample. The main reason for selecting for variety was to discover whether a common process of becoming an off-campus student was discernible in spite of other differences. Some variability was ensured by selecting students from a university and a college, and care was taken that a range of the courses offered by each of the institutions was represented in the enrolment patterns of the group selected. It was decided to include approximately equal numbers of women and men, but the distribution in the sample of other social determinants such as age, class and ethnicity was left to chance with the exception of one person who was especially chosen because of her advanced age.

Geographic considerations were also important. Three broad geographic categories were identified which were thought to pertain to distance education populations in Australia generally as well as to the student populations of the two selected institutions. The sample therefore included students who lived near to their chosen campus; students whose homes were relatively remote from the campus; and students who lived in the metropolitan area of the State capital city. Pragmatic considerations also affected the final selection: in order to limit the amount of travel required of the researcher, the
participants were clustered in four districts. The appended map (Appendix A) shows
the residential locations of the students, who are identified by their initials.

With the co-operation of senior personnel of both institutions and of administrative
staff who supplied lists of new students at an early stage of the enrolment process,
written invitations to take part in the project (Appendices B, C and D) were sent to
forty students from each of the two institutions. Subsequently a selection of nine was
made from the eighteen Institute students who responded positively on the form
provided, and eight of thirty-one Deakin students who were contacted by telephone as a
follow-up to the letter which invited their participation. (The use of a form to solicit
student response to the initial invitation was the preferred method of the Head of
External Studies at the Institute. The less formal method of follow-up telephone call
was acceptable at Deakin University where the researcher was a member of staff).

This selection process involved some negotiation between the researcher and
prospective interviewees carried out by postal correspondence and/or telephone. For
example, some of the students expected to travel overseas during the period in
question, and two of the women who initially responded in the affirmative revealed in
follow up telephone conversations that they were pregnant. The pregnant women
anticipated that they would be unavailable for interview in the period immediately
before and after the birth, and possibly at other times. Both researcher and prospective
interviewee had to consider whether such forthcoming events would affect their ability
to participate. In the course of such negotiation a certain amount of mutual assessment
took place.

Each of the seventeen people selected was interviewed either at home or at their place
of employment on successive occasions in accordance with a planned basic pattern of
four cycles of interviews intended to encompass the completion of one academic year
and extend into the following year. The timing of the visits was planned to coincide as
closely as possible with significant events of the academic year: initial exposure to the
new experience, the first assessment period and the completion of the year. The first
round of interviews took place between 26 January and 24 March, 1988; the second
between 23 April and 20 June, 1988; the third between October 14 and 12 December,
1988; and the final visits to the students were made between 13 and 25 November,
1989. As a result of changing circumstances in their lives, or of difficulties in finding
mutually suitable meeting times, only nine of the participants were interviewed on four
occasions. Four were interviewed on three occasions, and another four twice only.

Each of the fifty-six interviews was tape-recorded, listened to, transcribed, read and
re-read. As well as 'surface' analysis of the content, each recorded interview was
subjected to an intensive hermeneutic 'reading' in an attempt to distil the essential message conveyed by each participant. Some of the results of this interpretive process were offered to the participants in subsequent interviews for their validation or repudiation. Finally certain common themes were identified and conceptualised in terms of an interactionist theory of socialisation and in terms of certain bodies of feminist theory. The result of this investigative process is a micro sociology which is sensitive to gender issues in substantive and methodological domains. It is the author's hope that the intensity of the interpretive process is such as to render these case studies valuable by virtue of their specificity and by their capacity to resonate with the experience of others.
CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND ISSUES

3.1 Introduction

The research problems outlined in Chapter 2 express interests in understanding the experience of off-campus study from the students’ points of view, and in developing a critical awareness of the research process, particularly the methodology of interviews. These interests reflect concerns which are grounded in two aspects of the researcher’s experience: a decade of professional involvement in the field of distance education, and the experience of being a woman. The consciousness produced by such experiential background constitutes the ‘prejudice’ (Gadamer, 1976) or pre-formed knowledge base which the researcher brings to the enterprise of understanding. This concept is elaborated below.

A consistent theme which unifies both substantive and methodological aspects of the project is the interpretation of meaning. It is appropriate, therefore, that its theoretical framework should be derived chiefly from hermeneutics and phenomenology, the philosophical traditions which are most concerned with the issues of meaning, understanding and interpretation, and which inform the interpretive social sciences. The thesis developed herein is also argued in terms of feminist theory which is considered to be compatible in many respects with the European ‘verstehen’ tradition. Where appropriate, the explanatory framework is enhanced by reference to other social theorists such as Habermas and Giddens. Such an eclectic approach is consistent with the sources of ‘prejudice’ identified above and appropriate for the research aims.

3.2 Philosophical traditions and research paradigms

Giddens (1979b) distinguishes three different kinds of sciences or disciplines:

First there are the ‘empirical analytical sciences’ which are founded in concerns with prediction and control, and are derivable from knowledge that is nomological in form. In them, ‘Theories comprise hypothetico-deductive connections of propositions, which permit the deduction of law-like hypotheses with empirical content’. The second are ‘Historical-hermeneutic sciences’ which are concerned with understanding traditions and their artistic and literary products. To these, however, must be added a third discipline: critical theory. Critical theory finds its task in the furtherance of an interest in emancipation, in the achievement of rational autonomy of action freed from domination (Giddens, 1979b, 44).
The growing dissatisfaction among social scientists with empirical analytical science has produced critique not only of its failure to achieve ideals and goals, but of its basic premises (Bernstein, 1976). Many critics associate such premises with the theory of knowledge called positivism, which Johnson (1975, 4) refers to as the ‘intellectual foundation on which modern science rests’. Some claim that the pervasive influence of positivism has produced a complete intellectual orientation, or paradigm, incorporating not only a particular methodology but also associated philosophies, value systems and views of reality (Carr and Kemmis, 1983; Lindholm, 1981; Popkewitz, 1984).

Because of the perceived dominance of the established paradigm, some social scientists who draw on other philosophical and methodological traditions describe themselves as operating in an ‘alternative’ paradigm (Johnson, 1975). In research and evaluation in education, the terms ‘qualitative’ and ‘ethnographic’ have been used in attempts to define alternative paradigms. The use of such terms reflects interest in methodologies such as participant observation derived from social anthropology (Parlett and Hamilton, 1976, 84-90; Smith, 1978, 329; Wilson, 1977, 245-265). Popkewitz (1984) identifies three paradigms, which correspond approximately to the three kinds of sciences, or disciplines, distinguished by Giddens: the empirical-analytic paradigm, the symbolic paradigm, and the critical science paradigm. Carr and Kemmis (1983) make a similar distinction, using the terms: ‘natural scientific’, ‘interpretive’ and ‘critical’.

Interpretive sociology, which includes the symbolic interactionists and others influenced by the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz such as ethnomethodologists, has been criticised as limited by Giddens (1976), Carr and Kemmis, (1983) and Popkewitz (1984). Giddens (1976), referring to the work of Schutz, Goffman and Garfinkel, argues that while interpretive social science contributes to the understanding of social processes at the ‘micro’ level of interaction, it fails to provide an adequate account of the ‘macro’ dimension of social structure, and of the relationship between the individual and society. Specifically, Giddens (1976, 53) objects that (1) interpretive social science deals with action as meaning rather than praxis; (2) that it fails to give adequate recognition to the centrality of power in human relationships; (3) that social norms and rules are capable of differential interpretation. Similarly, Carr and Kemmis contend that interpretive theory neglects issues of social structure, power and social change, and maintain that: ‘the interpretive view of the relationship of theory to practice is seriously flawed’ (1983, 95).

Such criticism fails to give due regard to the explanatory capacity of Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) phenomenological thesis on the sociology of knowledge, which incorporates a theory of institutionalisation. Neither does it acknowledge the essential
compatibility of the model of social processes constructed by these authors with that proposed by Giddens. In both models, the relationship between the individual and society is envisaged as a structured dialectic. Berger and Luckmann's analysis of the processes of externalisation, objectivation and internalisation bears a considerable resemblance to Giddens's (1979a, 80-85) exposition of the recursive nature of social production and reproduction through the dialectic relationship of agent and structure. Both theories accord the individual a degree of voluntarism, as 'actor' in the interactionist terminology, and as 'agent' in that of Giddens.

Berger and Luckmann acknowledge (1966, 207-211) that a theory of structure is implicit but not developed in their treatise. Referring to their work, Dawkins et al. support this contention:

...implicit in this dialectic, in which man is the creature of his own creation, is the notion that it is the very structuring of society which is externalised, objectivated and internalised into social reality (Dawkins et al., 1979, 83).

The 'interactionist' and 'critical' positions are therefore complementary rather than contradictory. Moreover, to categorise bodies of theory and research practice as constituting distinct paradigms is a somewhat artificial and overly simplistic approach, as Hammersley (1985) argues with respect to Popkowitz' treatment of the subject: Social scientists are divided into goodies (critical theorists) and baddies (empirical-analytic researchers), with the gullible supporters of the 'symbolic' paradigm in the middle (Hammersley, 1985, 247).

3.2.1 The interpretive position relative to this project

In so far as these distinctions are accepted as useful, then, the theoretical and methodological framework of this project is located mainly in the interpretive tradition or paradigm. The particular strength of Berger and Luckmann's conceptualisation of social processes in respect to this study lies in its capacity to demonstrate the relationships between subjective and objective reality. Because the researcher's intention is to reach an understanding of how the students interviewed construe the meaning of their experience as students, the focus of the study is intentionally at the 'micro' level of the subjective realities of individuals and their interactions with others in a specific institutional context. Such a focus does not, however, preclude a consideration of the structuring principles such as age, gender, ethnicity and class with which the micro sociology intersects, or of the larger social systems and contexts in which individual lives take place. Rather, the 'macro' level of structure and system is the context within which the 'micro' interactional framework is read.
As indicated in Chapter 2, the purpose of the study is primarily illuminative. The aim of the researcher is to give weight to what students bring to the process of education. For this purpose, it is most appropriate to try to present their experience from the students' perspectives. This aim is consistent with a theoretical position which encompasses a conception of individuals as active agents in the construction of their own lives and of social processes, and with a belief that education should be student-centred and interactive. This is not to say, however, that the subjects' accounts are necessarily treated uncritically, a criticism which Carr and Kemmis make of interpretive sociology. Rather, the method of hermeneutic interpretation described in Chapter 4 makes problematic not only the interviewees' statements, but also the context of the interview in which they are expressed. As explained in that chapter, rather than being a question of adopting a critical or uncritical position, the choice of interpretive position is between the exercise of the hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Unlike critical social science and much feminist research, the purpose of this project is not directed towards a specific agenda of social change. Although the researcher's previous professional experience as a student advocate ensures an awareness of the political dimensions of the student experience, the project represents a deliberate attempt to carry out research free from the limitations of a particular politically interested position. Neither is the emancipation or empowerment of participants on the researcher's agenda, although the interviews were conducted in such a way as to afford opportunities for reflection and increased self-awareness. The project is emancipatory in intent in the general sense that illumination of the student experience is regarded as an essential preliminary to change (Knefelcamp, 1987).

The choice of interactionist theory pertains to the aim of exploring the relevance of a concept of culture to the situation of off-campus students as marginal members of educational institutions. Interactionist sociology provides systematic analyses and descriptions of the social processes by which institutional cultures are constructed and by which social integration and sense of identity are accomplished by individuals. Such analyses are premised on an assumption of the primary role of face-to-face encounters in the interpretation and construction of meaning in social life (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, 43). In terms of interactionist theory, distance education is remarkable for the absence of the very kinds of communication through which reality is commonly negotiated. As a social system it is characterised not only by the spatial (and, it is here contended, social) isolation of the individuals who belong to one class of institutional personnel, the students, but also by the rationalisation, abstraction, and formalisation of interaction throughout the system (Harris, 1987). Moreover, distance education is
embedded in the context of a culture of higher education premised on face-to-face interpersonal relationships. In the institutional perspective some of the taken-for-granted components of this culture are overlooked and inadequately communicated to those marginal members, the students. Applying interactionist concepts to this situation helps to make such components apparent.

3.2.2 Feminist research and theory

While it is appropriate, for the reasons given above, that the conceptual framework developed in the course of the project should be drawn from interactionist sociology, the choice of a research paradigm which can accommodate the interpretive aim of exploring relationships and structures of meaning is also an expression of a feminist orientation.

The attack on accepted epistemological foundations mounted by interpretive and critical social scientists has been joined by feminist scholars who also propose the existence of a dominant paradigm but who characterise the paradigm as patriarchal (Laws, 1978; Spender, 1981a, 1981b). Some feminist scholars seek to establish the parameters of a feminist paradigm (Klein, 1983, 98; Stanley and Wise, 1983a; 1983b). While such scholarship does not identify exclusively with either positivist or qualitative paradigms (du Bois, 1983), there is a certain congruence between dichotomies quantitative - qualitative, and those which recur as themes in the feminist literature: objective - subjective; public - private; masculist - feminist (Graham, 1983, 136; Smith, 1979).

3.2.2.1 Knowledge as social construct - a feminist perspective

Fundamental to the critique of empirical analytical science is the perception that knowledge cannot be absolute, but rather is socially constructed. Kuhn's (1962) analysis of the work of scientific communities, Polanyi's (1969) philosophical critique of positivism, and Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work on the sociology of knowledge have been influential in the clarification of this perception.

A number of feminist authors (Davies et al., 1985; du Bois, 1983; Eichler, 1988; Gilligan, 1982; Smith, 1979; Spender, 1981b) have examined knowledge as a social construct, arguing that the conceptual apparatus by which intellectual disciplines have been defined has been put together by men and is an expression of their experience. Because men have had a monopoly over the production of codified knowledge, such knowledge is only a partial representation of reality. This fact goes unrecognised,
because the distinctive character of women's experience of the world is not acknowledged. Instead, the knowledge produced by men is is treated as either universal or neutral in respect to gender. The experiential reality of women disappears or is regarded as aberrant because the experience of men is treated as the norm. Thus feminists such as Porter (1986) and Spender (1981; 1982) describe the task of conceptualising gender in education as a matter of making women visible.

Feminist analysis of the content of intellectual disciplines reveals the processes by which women are either ignored or treated as anomalous to the male norm. For example, Gilligan (1982) reconstructs the discipline of psychology, demonstrating that results of experimental studies have been interpreted on the unexamined assumption of the male as norm, with the result that female characteristics appear deficient or deviant. When the same experimental data are interpreted from a perspective which positively values female characteristics, very different results are obtained.

Similarly du Bois (1983) interprets the male-oriented construction of knowledge as the construction of both women's invisibility and their silence:

'Naming' is probably the first order of interpretation in science... and naming, the capacity to name what we see, is a matter of language, inherently expressive of culture. In science as in society, the power of naming is at least two-fold: naming defines the quality and value of that which is named - and it also denies reality and value to that which is never named, never uttered. That which has no name, that for which we have no words or concepts, is rendered mute and invisible: powerless to inform or transform our consciousness of our experience, our understanding, our vision: powerless to claim its own existence.

This has been the situation of women in our world. And this silence, this invisibility, has been confirmed and perpetuated by the ways in which social science has looked at - and not seen - women (du Bois, 1983, 108).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the literature of distance education is especially remarkable for its androcentricity. The few who have reviewed this literature from a gender-conscious perspective (Burge and Lonskyj, 1990; Carl, 1988; Faith and Coulter, 1988; Matiri and Gachui, 1988) comment on the invisibility of women and deplore the fact that the growing interest in gender issues in education more generally appears to have been largely ignored in this field.
3.2.2.2 Towards a feminist paradigm?

Proposing that an epistemology identifiable as the product of women's consciousness exists in potential, Davies et al. speculate that:

the structure of women's knowledge might derive from biological determinants, from the condition of marginality itself or it might be a vital legacy of 'real' knowledge from which men have been alienated, either by the dominance of Cartesian thought and teaching or by their closer involvement with the processes of industrialisation (Davies et al., 1985, 4).

One way of approaching the task of defining such an epistemology is to identify gender-based differences, either biologically determined or socially constructed. Using extended interviews, Belenky et al. (1986) researched the epistemological frameworks of American women from a fairly wide cross-section of the community and produced evidence of gender-specific ways of knowing. Among the characteristic ways of knowing identified by these researchers as one stage in a developmental process is 'connected knowing':

Connected knowing arises out of the experience of relationships; it requires intimacy and equality between self and object, not distance and impersonality; its goal is understanding, not proof (Belenky et al., 1986, 114).

These findings are consistent with theories of gender differences in cognitive style and moral reasoning developed by Gilligan (1982) and Harding (1985) which maintain that men's ways of knowing are more associated with autonomy, separation, certainty, control and abstraction, whereas women think in terms of relationships and context, are more empathetic, and can accommodate ambiguity more readily. Such attempts to identify essential gender-based differences have been fruitful, although, as Kenway and Modra (1989) warn, there is some danger that essentialist thinking may: 'tap right back into the gender stereotypes from which escape is sought' (1989, 5).

Another approach to the question is to make existing forms of scholarship problematic. By examining his own practice as a sociologist, Morgan exposes gender bias not only in methodology and analysis, but more importantly, in the formulation of research problems. Maintaining that the dominance of men in academic settings creates a male culture, he asks:

..how far the academic discourse is in fact a male discourse, sheltering behind such labels as 'rationality', 'scientific' or 'scholarly'? (Morgan, 1981, 97).
The idea that so-called 'universal' knowledge is actually a male paradigm is supported by Morgan's perception that:

..at the level of culture, the model of rationality becomes confounded with the dominant male culture of the university environment (Morgan, 1981, 83).

In their definition of paradigm, given in the context of a discussion of Kuhn's use of the term, Carr and Kemmis emphasise the association between the mental framework, or interpretation of reality, and the existence of a supporting cultural matrix:

A 'paradigm' embodies the particular conceptual framework through which the community of researchers operates and in terms of which a particular interpretation of 'reality' is generated. It also incorporates models of research, standards, rules of enquiry and a set of techniques and methods, all of which ensure that any theoretical knowledge that is produced will be consistent with the view of reality that the paradigm supports (Carr and Kemmis, 1983, 72).

In a paper titled: 'Feminism and patriarchy, competing ways of doing social science', Laws (1978) uses the term 'paradigm':

to refer to the domain assumptions associated with a social system which actualises dominance of women by men, together with ideology, knowledge, and socialisation practices which render such dominance expected, 'natural', and 'real' (Laws, 1978, 5).

Much of the work of feminist scholarship such as that of Eichler, (1988); Laws (1978) and Spender (1981a, 1981b) has consisted of the systematic identification of patriarchal domain assumptions and analysis of their effect on scholarship and on women who aspire to scholarship. It is more difficult, however, to define what a feminist paradigm might be. The growing body of feminist scholarship, although diverse and internally fractured, represents in some sense a community of shared values, and constitutes the expression of that community. There appears to be fairly general agreement that feminist research is woman-centred, interdisciplinary and always political. Consciousness is an important if not essential element in the construction of feminist knowledge, which is grounded in women's experiential realities. With regard to research methodology, there is frequently an acknowledgment of subjectivity and an emphasis on non-exploitative relationships.

However, if there is such a thing as a feminist paradigm, it is something which is struggling to emerge and define itself (du Bois, 1983). Writing within the discipline of sociology, Smith (1979) predicts that the distinctively female consciousness must
emerge along a 'line of fault' created by the disjunctions between women's experiential reality and the available socially constructed forms of thought. Clearly, feminist scholarship does not exist in a vacuum, but must inevitably define itself in relation to existing traditions of thought. It has to be recognised that the process of constructing women-centred definitions of reality includes the adoption and adaptation of elements of the existing traditions of thought. In this context, the observations of Lindholm (1981) on the factors affecting choice of research paradigm and the most desirable attitude towards different paradigms are apposite:

...research on societal and human phenomena calls for several different types of researchers, 'intuitive', 'objective' and others. This has a couple of consequences: First, we must admit that 'paradigm' does interact with 'personality' or, in more concrete terms, we researchers are differently 'equipped' to inquire into different aspects of an ambiguous, multifaceted reality. Instead of worshipping the one or other type of research as a paragon, we must recognise that deeper knowledge of reality requires co-creation between and among these various approaches, and between types of researchers and other groups, including 'the man on the street', artists, etc. With respect to the realm of scientific inquiry and particularly the training of researchers, this view has a further consequence; it demands that we - far more than at present - discuss, make explicit, and practice such aspects of the research process as demand the ability to recognise perspectives, intuition and 'a good nose' (Lindholm, 1981, 136, original emphasis).

3.3 The conceptual power of hermeneutics

In keeping with the position stated in the preceding paragraph, it is argued here that the body of thought which has most to offer feminist social scientists who choose to work in a symbolic or interpretive paradigm is hermeneutics, a philosophical tradition which can be traced back in time at least as far as the classical civilisation of ancient Greece. According to Veit-Brause (1980), the word 'hermeneutics' derives from the Greek 'hermeneuivn', which refers to interpretation. In classical mythology, the task of Hermes, the messenger of the gods, was not only to deliver, but also to decipher, messages which were expressed as omens and signs. As an approach to understanding, the word hermeneutics therefore implies the discovery of hidden meanings.

Modern interpretive theory dates from the work of the German philosophers Schleiermacher and Dilthey who extended the scope of hermeneutics to the study of understanding itself, applicable in all the human sciences (Gallacher and Daminco, 1989, 3; Veit-Brause, 1980, 124-137). Significant developments have occurred in the
twentieth century through the synthesis of hermeneutic thought with phenomenology
and existentialism. Central concepts are that phenomena have multiple meanings; that
meanings are contextual, and therefore to be discovered by understanding relationships
between the part and the whole; and that progress towards understanding is a cyclic
process which entails the progressive correction of misunderstanding, but which is
always reflexive (Durphy, 1980; Gallacher and Damico, 1989; Lindholm, 1981).
Applied to sociology, hermeneutics entails the unfolding of the multiple levels of
meaning which underlie the phenomena of everyday life.

In the following sections hermeneutic concepts are related to issues identified as
problematic by both 'qualitative' and feminist researchers. These issues include: the
ideal of objectivity; the role of subjectivity and personal experience in research and the
generation of theory; problems of generalisability and validation; the orientation of
research goals towards interpretation and understanding rather than measurement and
control; and the definition, politics and elucidation of meaning.

3.3.1 Subject - object duality

At the level of theory, the ideal of objective, value-free knowledge is enshrined in the
philosophy of positivism (Bernstein, 1976; Carr and Kemmis, 1983; Filmer et al. 1972;
Johnson, 1975) and codified in the ideal formulation of the scientific method.
Traditional scientific method rests on the assumption that the observer is separate from
the object of his/her observations, which exists 'out there' as a thing, typically in
material form. The observer is not only separate from the observed, but also detached
from parts of his/her own self. The ideal of objective knowledge requires that the
observer's subjectivity, be it mental framework, value system, perception or emotions,
is treated as a source of bias, to be eliminated or corrected for. According to Davies et
al. (1985) this 'dichotomy of epistemology and ontology' is fundamental to post-
Enlightenment philosophy, and results in an alienation of the products of research from
the researcher. These authors argue that women in particular experience this separation
of the knower from the known as alien to their consciousness.

The challenge to the positivist ideal of objectivity mounted variously by interpretive
social scientists, qualitative researchers in the field of education and feminist scholars
rests on four main arguments. The first is that methods adopted from the natural
sciences are inappropriate for the social sciences, which constitute a generically
different kind of subject matter (Johnson, 1975; Carr and Kemmis, 1983). This
argument is based on an appreciation of the role of interpretation in interpersonal
interaction and in social phenomena (Bernstein, 1976, 62).
The second argument, that traditional conceptions of scientific method do not represent a true account of how science is actually done, provides a basis for the concept that knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is a social construct. As mentioned above, this concept owes much to the work of Kuhn (1962) on the modes of operation of communities of scientists, and of Berger and Luckmann (1966) on the sociology of knowledge. A recent cultural study of a scientific community in Australia (Charlesworth et al., 1989) is premised upon such a conception.

The third objection follows from the second; that is, that the ideal of value-free knowledge is a myth, which serves to conceal the inescapable effect of subjectivity not only on research outcomes, but on the kinds of research questions asked. Feminists use this argument to assert that in a patriarchal society, objectivity is the name given to male subjectivity (Spender, 1981b; Rich, 1979).

The fourth objection to the ideal of objectivity is based in concerns with its effect on applied research. Writers on the philosophy of the social sciences such as Bernstein (1976); critical theorists (Habermas, 1972; Carr and Kemmis 1983), and feminists (Oakley, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983a) not only criticize mainstream social science for being ineffectual in promoting beneficial social change, but also identify the established paradigm with an oppressive instrumentalism which they attribute to the reification and alienation of the knower and the known. Spender (1981b, 4-5) says that the feminist challenge to the ideal of objectivity operates at two levels: first, that the identification of objectivity with the male psyche is an example of the more highly valued capacity being attributed to men, and secondly that the ideal of objectivity has served to legitimate the so-called objective fact of women's inferior nature.

At the level of philosophical debate, the question of objectivity has been approached through the synthesis in the twentieth century of the two European traditions of hermeneutics and phenomenology. As mentioned above, hermeneutics has a long history in European thought, while phenomenology stems mainly from the philosophical investigations of Husserl. Heidegger is a key figure in effecting the synthesis between the two. Significant later contributions have been made by Gadamer (1976; 1977); Habermas (1972; 1979); and Ricoeur (1965, 1970, 1973, 1974; 1978, 1981).

According to Thompson (1981) the first development on the issue of objectivity can be attributed to Heidegger:

...in spite of their critiques of positivism, both Dilthey and Husserl remained prisoners of a Kantian theory of knowledge, unable to free their thought from the traditional juxtaposition of subject and object. However,
Heidegger maintains that before any object is posited for a subject both these terms are bound together by a fundamental relation of being in the world. So rather than searching for the conditions under which a knowing subject can understand a particular expression or constitute a particular object, Heidegger begins with an ontological enquiry into the nature of that being which is capable of such activities, that is, into the nature of ‘Dasein’ (Thompson, 1981, 40).

Gadamer’s later (1977) exploration of the issue of the role of subjectivity in the production of knowledge provides a link between feminist theory and the theoretical basis of ‘qualitative’ research. In order to make this link, it is necessary to understand two key concepts of hermeneutics: the contextuality of meaning and the circularity of the processes of understanding. Hermeneutic method involves a dialectic, or constant referencing, between text and context. Understanding is held to proceed not in the linear fashion implicit in the positivist hypothetico-deductive method, but in an expanding spiral which encompasses and builds on the tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1969) from which the process begins.

While earlier philosophers such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey sought some kind of accommodation between hermeneutics and the ideal requirement of objective knowledge, Gadamer (1977), in a significant development on previous hermeneutic theory, gave positive value to subjectivity by broadening the concept of tacit foreknowledge. According to Gadamer, the consciousness of the one who seeks understanding is inescapably embedded in history and tradition and at a fundamental linguistic level provides:

an initial schematisation for all our possibilities of knowing (Gadamer, 1977, 13 emphasis added).

In Gadamer’s terms, this fundamental matrix of the subjective consciousness constitutes the necessary and unavoidable ‘prejudice’ of the one who seeks understanding. If it is accepted that in important dimensions women’s knowledge is different from that of men (Belenky et al., 1986; Daly, 1978; Roberts, 1981; Smith, 1979; Spender, 1981b; Stanley and Wise, 1983b); that knowledge is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Spender, 1981a; 1981b) and that sexism is encoded in language (Eichler, 1988; Daly, 1978; Spender, 1980) then it becomes apparent that in Gadamer’s terms, gender must constitute prejudice in important respects. The argument that feminist scholarship has a distinctive contribution to make to epistemology and methodology is therefore strengthened by reference to philosophical hermeneutics.
In Gadamer's hermeneutics, all understanding is essentially self-understanding, because in the process of the hermeneutic spiral of understanding, the seeker is repeatedly returned to his/her starting place, but each time, that position is apprehended differently because of the process undertaken. Reinharz reaches the same conclusion in her statement on "Reclaiming Self-awareness as a Source of Insight", although she does not appear to be familiar with hermeneutics:

The 'objectivity' of the social sciences is not the expression of a dispassionate and detached view of the social world; it is, rather, an ambivalent effort to accommodate to alienation and to express a muted resentment to it... Instead of avoiding self-revelation (in Gouldner's terms, 'self-obscuring methodologies'), the reflexive stance exploits self-awareness as a source of insight and discovery (Reinharz, 1979, 241, original emphasis).

Similarly Stanley and Wise (1983b) insist that:

...it is inevitable that the researcher's own experience and consciousness will be involved in the research process as much as they are in life, and we shall argue that all research must be concerned with the experiences and consciousness of the researcher as an integral part of the research process... All human attributes are brought into the research situation by researchers, are inevitably brought into it... In these terms 'feminism' can be seen as a direct parallel to 'sexism', because it similarly constitutes the presence of a distinct set of values within the research situation. It is this which we argue must be made explicit within feminist research (Stanley and Wise, 1983b, 48-49, original emphasis).

Bowles (1984) is unusual among feminist writers in making the link between hermeneutic theory and the feminist insistence on the epistemological value of personal experience and subjectivity:

The hermeneutic circle... means essentially that there is no such thing as a 'detached', or 'neutral' or 'objective' place to stand when we know something. We are always speaking from a 'prejudiced' (in the sense of pre-judgment) and 'interested' and 'evaluative' posture. This is the circle, that we are intimately (personally, socially, historically) involved with what we claim to know (Bowles, 1984, 187).

In their impressive research-based exploration of Women's Ways of Knowing Belenky et al. (1986) express a perception of the relationship between knowledge and self-understanding which is entirely compatible with the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur, although their reference to European philosophical traditions is confined to a
footnote. The context of the following extract is a discussion of what the authors term ‘connected knowing’ in which they construct an interpretation of the message of an informant called Faith:

But Faith had not learned how to use herself as an instrument for understanding. This requires self-knowledge, and Faith’s teachers had offered her little opportunity for self-knowledge. Faith needed practice in constructing metaphorical extensions to span the distance between her own and others’ experiences. She needed to learn to respect her own reactions, not as final truths but as starting points for understanding (Belenky et al., 1986, 122, original emphasis).

Possibly the most impressive feminist statement on the issue of objectivity is made by du Bois. The insights she reaches are essentially those of philosophical hermeneutics, but since she makes no reference to this body of theory one assumes that they have been reached independently through examination of the problematics of her personal experience:

Our scientific methods, as women, as feminists, require seeing things as they are: whole, entire, complex. Our work requires that we see things in context, that we understand and explain our eventful, complex reality within and as a part of its matrix. It is only within its matrix that experience, reality, can be known. And this matrix includes the knower (du Bois, 1983, 111, original emphasis).

Du Bois says further that the dichotomy between objective and subjective is an artificial polarisation of ways of knowing, and that women, by reason of their experience, are well placed to transcend this dichotomy. Her insight into the ‘double consciousness’ of women is similar to Smith’s (1979) concept of the ‘line of fault’ referred to above:

We are in and of our society but in important ways also not ‘of’ it. We see and think in terms of our culture; we have been trained in these terms, shaped to them... Yet we have always another consciousness, another potential language within us, available to us... We are the observer and the observed, subject and object, knower and known. When we take away the lenses of androcentrism and patriarchy, what we have left is our own eyes, ourselves, and each other (du Bois, 1983, 112).

This is not to suggest that feminist researchers are alone in appreciating the role of subjectivity in the conduct and outcomes of research, but rather to delineate areas of compatibility. Long before Stanley and Wise attempted to define a feminist theory, Johnson (1975) made a radical departure from mainstream social science in his treatise
on field work by reflecting critically on the processes of his own research, including the hitherto taboo subject of the researcher's feelings and subjective reality. What is suggested, however, is that feminist thought on certain issues has much in common with philosophy in the hermeneutic tradition and that the latter could provide feminist scholarship with a philosophical 'home' of considerable sophistication.

3.3.2 Meaning

In this study of adults entering a new stage of their formal education, meaning is construed in two associated senses. The former derives from adult learning theory and refers to the personal meaning frameworks constructed by individuals in terms of which they interpret, or 'make sense' of experience (Brookfield, 1986; Candy, 1980; Mezirow, 1977). The latter refers to the sociological processes by which human actors construct and negotiate definitions of reality. These two domains of meaning are associated by the fact that although idiosyncratic, the personal framework is embedded in culture. In the hermeneutics employed in this research, the adults' accounts of their student experience are interpreted in terms of the two associated contexts: the personal framework and the social processes of induction and enculturation.

The ultimate issue for radical feminism is the politics of meaning, since power is essentially the ability and freedom to define reality. Part of the common experience of women is the disempowerment which results from the greater capacity of men as the dominant group to define socially accepted reality, or what Oakley describes as:

... the awful soul-destroying tyranny of being told the meaning of their lives in terms which are not theirs (Oakley, 1984, 96).

The politics of meaning is the central concern of Daly's (1978) powerful exploration of the links between the symbolic systems of language and myth and the internalisation of structures of meaning. Daly is concerned with the discovery of the 'deep' structure manifest in 'surface' phenomena and her analysis demonstrates the recursive processes whereby meaning is constructed and maintained. The issue of the politics of meaning is both fundamental and wide reaching in its implications. Radical feminist critique in effect says that:

...the meanings that a male-dominated society has projected on the world, the sense that patriarchy has provided, is harmful and destructive to women, society and the planet (Spender, 1985, 207).
The issue is not confined to radical feminism, however, as Spender (1985) comments in her review of the contributions of various women writers to the construction of feminism:

Throughout this book, the issues of meaning and of the limitations of understanding and the role played by language and myth, have been returned to again and again as problems for feminism. No matter what the origin of the writers, they have all met with resistance to feminist ideas, of our means of making sense of the world (Spender, 1985, 203).

In the sense that such a concern with the politics of meaning is seen as a radical feminist position, then this thesis can be identified as radical in its theoretical perspective. Feminist researchers have demonstrated a particular sensitivity to the politics of meaning and it is true to say that in this instance, such an interest is part of a feminist orientation. The wish to present the students’ perspectives of the experience of distance education reflects a concern with the politics of meaning which is grounded primarily in the experience of living as a woman and illuminated, at a secondary level, by feminist theory. This is not to say that an experience common to women is necessarily confined to women, nor is it implied that male researchers in the field are not interested in the student perspective. Neither is the irony of this position lost on the author. The interpretation of the students’ stories by another is a different matter from their telling their own stories, and, in fact, involves the double hermeneutic noted by Giddens in his discussion of the difference between the natural and the social sciences (Giddens, 1976, 79).

3.3.2.1 Life histories and meaning frameworks

Individuals make sense of the social and natural worlds which they inhabit in terms of the ready-made interpretive frameworks supplied by culture (Giddens, 1976, 78). This is not to say that the available cultural meanings are necessarily accepted without question, as revolutionary movements attest. Individuals also reflexively monitor their own thoughts and behaviour (Giddens, 1976, 82). That is, human beings are active agents (in Giddens’s terms) not only in the construction of culturally meaningful social life, but also in the construction of their own privately meaningful life histories, or autobiographies. According to hermeneutic theory:

...meanings arise when our perspective has achieved such a focus that we are able to define previously disparate, unrelated elements as belonging together, as being part of the same whole (Lindholm, 1981, 127, original emphasis).
The themes of active agency and construction of meaning frameworks recur in adult learning theory. Candy (1980) contends that the works of adult educators such as Tough, Knowles, Knox, Rogers, Houle and Freire, although written from different perspectives, exhibit two common elements: the notion of self-directedness, and:

...the emphasis, to a greater or lesser extent, on individual structures of meaning or, to paraphrase Berger and Luckmann, *Personally Constructed Realities* (Candy, 1980, 5-6 original emphasis).

Further, as a body of psychological theory of particular relevance to adult educators Candy cites Kelly’s (1955) personal construct theory which essentially:

...rests on the assumption that we all seek to make sense of the world around us, and to do so, construct more or less elaborate, multi-dimensional models of reality inside our heads (Candy, 1980, 9).

A similar concept appears in Bourdieu and Passeron’s critical theory of education as cultural reproduction in the guise of the term ‘habitus’. While not clearly defined in the original, the term is understood as referring to:

the tacit understandings or perceptual frames through which meaning is constructed. It amounts to the internalization of the cultural conventions by which objects are literally or ideally defined (Bredo and Feinberg, 1979, 319).

The concepts of ‘personal construct’ and ‘habitus’ are compatible with the theories of Mezirow (1977; 1981; 1985) who uses the term ‘meaning perspective’ to refer to:

...a structure of cultural and psychological assumptions within which our past experience assimilates and transforms new experience (Mezirow, 1985, 21).

Mezirow defines ‘perspective transformation’ as part of a developmental process of lifelong learning. Although the foundations of individuals’ meaning frameworks are probably laid down during the childhood process of primary socialisation, and some stability in perspectives and meaning frameworks is necessary for the maintenance of mental and emotional balance, such frameworks are not necessarily static:

... to the degree our culture permits, we tend to move through adulthood along a maturity gradient which involves a sequential restructuring of one’s frame of reference for making and understanding meanings (Mezirow, 1977, 157).

Arguing that lifelong learning is increasingly a feature of modern society, Tennant (1990) explores the possibility of constructing an adult educational psychology by
identifying points of convergence in the literatures on adult intellectual and cognitive development, adult personality development, and adult education and learning. In Tennent's terms this thesis makes a contribution to the construction of such knowledge since it is informed by:

a developmental perspective which acknowledges the unique nature of particular life histories and the cultural and social values associated with the meaning of the developmental process (Tennent, 1990, 233).

There is thus considerable support in the literature of adult learning for the assumption that the people interviewed made meaning of their student experience in terms of idiosyncratic but culturally embedded belief structures or meaning frameworks. The purpose of the hermeneutic methodology is to discover some of the features of these frameworks.

3.3.2.2 Meaning in the social sciences

The construction of shared meanings through interpersonal processes of interpretation and negotiation is the subject of interpretive, phenomenological schools of sociology, which ultimately derive their inspiration from Husserl's perception of the primacy of the everyday life-world. Phenomenological sociology is premised on the perception not only that the everyday life-world is primary, but also that the act of interpretation of meanings is fundamental to social life. From this basic perception symbolic interactionist sociology constructs a conception of social life as a constantly reconstructed 'structured consensus of shared meanings' (Dawkins et al., 1979, 14). Social behaviour creates, takes place within, and is made possible by an 'elaborate set of meanings and values shared by members' which constitutes culture (Rose, 1962, 6).

Essential elements of interactionist theory are: human beings live in a symbolic environment as well as a physical environment; symbols refer to meanings and values; meanings and values are learned through communication:

Human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions. This mediation is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation between stimulus and response in the case of human behaviour (Blumer, 1962, 180).

Lindholm (1981, 126-7) describes meaning as something generated in the interaction between phenomena, the individual and culture. Geertz's definition of culture as 'socially established structures of meaning' (1973b, 10), and the interactionist concept given by Rose (above), are both consistent with Giddens's (1976) conception of the
relationship between the individual and culture and the individual and social structure as recursive in character. (This is not to equate culture with structure, but to acknowledge the interrelatedness of processes). That is, the individual is shaped by culture and at the same time participates in the constant process of its construction and reconstruction.

In such a conceptual picture, culture, which is manifest in the phenomena which individuals and collectives produce, appears as a matrix in which the individual is embedded. Such phenomena have meaning in terms of the culture which produces them, and are indicators of that culture:

All cultural objects (books, tools, works of all sorts, etc) point back, by their origin and meaning, to other subjects and to their active constitutive intentionalities (Schutz, 1962, 123-124).

When this is understood, the manifestations of culture, 'this acted document' as Geertz (1973b, 29) describes it, can be 'read' for meanings. This is the task of cultural analysis as Geertz sees it, and of those human sciences which share:

...a concern to deal with human thought and action as concrete, situated, yet going beyond the situation... So the research goal of the social scientist who shares this conception is to penetrate the world of everyday experience and reveal a latent reality, a cultural syntax, a hidden from experience governing system (Cockburn, 1983, 6.)

If culture is regarded as an acted document, or text, and it is understood that hermeneutic method involves the 'reading' of a text in context, then it becomes apparent that such an approach to the understanding of cultural phenomena is essentially hermeneutic. As mentioned elsewhere, the hermeneutic approach to understanding involves the recognition that meaning is contextual. In these terms, culture becomes the context within which social phenomena become meaningful, and the approach of phenomenological sociology can be recognised as an exercise in hermeneutics. Cockburn's description of the research goal then accords with Dunphy's definition of hermeneutics as:

...a sophisticated 'art' of interpretation to recover lost or hidden meanings and make foreign or past expressions of life intelligible to the reading interpreter (Dunphy et al., 1980, 51).

Understanding the task of phenomenological social science in these terms enables one to refute two criticisms to which it has been subject: that phenomenological sociology is confined to descriptive study of social phenomena and is inadequate to address
underlying structural issues, and that it is weak in capacity to generate generalisable theory. Meek addresses these issues in the context of case study. His perception of the task of interpretation agrees with that of Cockburn:

Often social researchers, in conducting case studies, confuse the 'place of study' with the 'object of study' ... This has led to the criticism that the method concentrates on unique phenomena and, thus, does not lend itself to scientific generalisation... By definition, all cases are unique; but the researcher does not study the case, rather he analyses various social forces - structure, power, values, norms, etc., - within the case (Meek, 1983, 7).

One of the watershed debates between positivist epistemology and hermeneutic philosophy is about the relative importance of explanation and understanding. The positivist preoccupation with explanation is associated with the endeavour to establish generally applicable causal laws (Carr and Kemmis, 1983, 64-67). A focus on understanding, on the other hand, is part of a preoccupation with meaning which renders positivist principles problematic. Those who find it more fruitful to search for understanding rather than causality encounter at the philosophical level the positivist conceptions of truth and validity, which are implicit in the methodological principles of causality and generalisability.

Noting that all research design bargains validity against generalisability, Kirkup confronts the issue in the context of a feminist model of evaluation research as follows:

The assumption contained in the evaluation I have done, using indepth qualitative data from a small sample, is that if I am able to understand the experience of the sample and describe it in appropriate language it will resonate with the experience and understanding of others in Women's Studies. It will be 'meaningful' rather than 'true' and although perhaps not generalisable in the research sense it will allow others access to the experience of those in my sample in such a way that it will contribute to such others gaining insight into their own situations (Kirkup, 1983, 24, emphasis added).

Positivist ideals are countered by arguments that all research findings, even those conducted in experimental laboratory situations, are context-dependent in meaning. An important attribute of the phenomenological consciousness is the propensity to recognise the research event as artefact (Lindholm, 1981, 132). Mishler (1979) argues that the task of research is the formulation of generalisations which make specific the context-dependence of relationships. Moreover, discussing phenomenology as an appropriate research paradigm, he explains that its task is not to exhaust the singular meaning of an event but rather to reveal the multiplicity of meanings.
The hermeneutic phenomenology of Ricoeur (1978) offers a way to conceptual synthesis of the dichotomy between explanation and understanding through an examination of the intersubjective nature of meaning. Ricoeur is able to do this by developing a concept of the text in which dialogue is the preferred epistemological position. He reaches the conclusion that:

(1) there is a mutual support system between understanding and explanation, provided that one recognises fundamental distinctions of operations; and (2) the relating of understanding to explanation underlies the discovery of Gadamer that what is understood is not the 'other mind' but the text, and what the text opens up is, in varying senses, the world. There is, between myself as the reader and the truth of the world thus exposed, a relation of belonging (Dunphy, 1980, 107, original emphasis).

The adoption of Ricoeur's philosophical position thus delivers the researcher from the necessity to exercise an either/or choice in respect to causality and meaning. So long as the epistemological implications of the two approaches are understood, they can be appreciated as related rather than mutually exclusive.

3.4 Application of the concept of culture to the context of distance education

Definitions of culture vary in degrees of inclusiveness. Coulsen and Riddell's definition of culture as: 'The sets of established ways of doing things in a society' (1980, 39) suggests that culture is narrowly defined as learned behavioural patterns, norms and customs. At the other extreme, Bierstedt defines culture comprehensively as all achievements of group life:

Culture is the complex whole that consists of all the ways we think and do and everything we have as members of a society (Bierstedt, 1963, 129).

In such a comprehensive definition, the importance of culture cannot be overestimated. Its content includes ideas, attitudes and values as well as norms, customs and material culture. It is a shared, learned design for living which depends on group life and is transmitted through social interaction.

Both definitions, though acceptable in their own terms, fail to emphasise the fact that things such as customs, norms and material objects are not in themselves culture, but are manifestations of culture, which essentially consists of 'socially established structures of meaning' (Geertz, 1973, 12). The concept of culture which informs the following discussion is inclusive of the underlying dimension of meaning structures as well as their manifestations in behavioural and material forms.
3.4.1 The acquisition and transmission of culture

Referring to Schutz’s concept of common stocks of knowledge, Giddens (1979a, 58) agrees that the acquisition of culture springs from the ‘pragmatic motive’, the practical necessities of lived experience which require ‘mutual knowledge’. Berger and Luckmann’s exploration of this theme is also derivative of Schutz:

I live in the commonsense world of everyday life equipped with specific bodies of knowledge. What is more, I know that others share at least part of this knowledge, and they know that I know this. My interaction with others in everyday life is, therefore, constantly affected by our common participation in the available social stock of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, 56).

Like Giddens, Berger and Luckmann perceive everyday life to be dominated by the pragmatic motive, and state that therefore, knowledge limited to pragmatic competence in routine performances, which they term ‘recipe knowledge’ forms a prominent part of the social stock of knowledge. It is a fundamental premise of interactionist theory that social interaction is the medium for the acquisition of recipe knowledge and the transmission of culture, and that face-to-face interaction is of primary importance in this process, all other cases being derivatives of this primary situation (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, 43).

However, the stocks of knowledge drawn upon by social actors ‘are not usually known to those actors in an explicitly codified form’ (Giddens, 1979a, 58), nor are people necessarily conscious of participating in a culture:

... we are all members of cultures. But we are not always conscious of our membership, for it is in the nature of cultures that much so-called ‘learned’ behaviour is so completely assimilated that it emerges as unthinking response (Cohen, 1982, 4).

The implications of these facts for distance education, in which much communication necessarily occurs over both spatial and social distances constitute a major component of the substantive subject matter of this study: people who study off-campus may lack sufficient opportunities to acquire necessary cultural knowledge.

The knowledge which enables an individual to participate as a member of a culturally defined group is learned through interaction, and this learning constitutes the process of socialisation. Recipe knowledge applied for practical purposes constitutes only part of the total ‘curriculum’ of socialisation. Social interaction is possible only to the extent
that social actors share in the symbolic universe which constitutes their culture (Dawkins et al., 1979, 44). Thus the relationship between the individual and culture is recursive. Social actors, or agents, to use Giddens’s term, contribute to the production and reproduction of culture at the same time as they take their sense of identity, meaning frameworks and recipes from it. As a cultural anthropologist, Geertz expresses this concept poetically:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Geertz, 1973b, 5).

While recipe knowledge is essential for effective participation as a member of a culture, the social stock of knowledge does not itself constitute culture. Culture is the context within which symbol systems are formulated, and within a given culture, multiple symbol systems exist:

The stocks of knowledge that are applied to make sense of the conduct of others, according to Schutz, constitute and operate within different ‘finite provinces of meaning’ or ‘multiple realities’. It is part of the normal competence of a social actor to shift between such provinces of meaning (Giddens, 1976, 30).

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966) societies create overarching symbolic universes, or conceptual schemes within which such finite provinces of meaning are either integrated, marginalised or denied. Although the world of everyday life presents itself as reality ‘par excellence’, neither knowledge nor reality is absolute. They are constructions of which symbol systems provide the frames. The internalisation of symbol systems creates what interactionists refer to as the ‘subjective reality’ of the individual.

3.4.2 Culture and structure

While accepting the basic premise of the dialectical relationship between the individual and society, Giddens (1976) criticises Schutz, and interpretive sociology in general, for an almost exclusive interest in subjective reality, and argues that:

... it is fundamental to complement the idea of the production of social life with that of the social reproduction of structures (Giddens, 1976, 126-127 original emphasis).

Giddens’s definition of structures as ‘systems of generative rules and resources’ (1976, 127) suggests organising principles rather than underlying meanings, but since the
recursive processes which operate in the production and reproduction of structures as he
describes them are essentially the same as those delineated by Berger and Luckmann in
relation to the construction of reality, or meaning frameworks, it becomes quite difficult
to distinguish between structure and culture in these terms. Doubtless this difficulty
contributes to the debate as to whether culture is subordinate to structure, or vice-versa
(Coulson and Riddell, 1980, 29). These authors associate structure with organising
principles and culture with ways of doing things. Dawkins and colleagues (1979, 58)
identify structure as key elements or principles which dominate a culture once
established. The relationships between culture, structure, individual and social processes
are represented diagramatically below (after Dawkins et al., 1979, 58).

Figure 1

social structures

cultures

social learning

individual

In the following sections, these concepts are applied to the context of distance
education, and in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 to the subjective experience of seventeen adults as
they attempted to integrate their participation in this context with other cultural contexts
in which their lives were already embedded.

3.4.3 Distance education as a cultural phenomenon of modernity

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there has been a rapid global trend towards the
formation of fewer, larger social and political entities. Associated with this trend is the
phenomenon of mass culture, facilitated by increasingly sophisticated means of
communication and industrialised production processes. While participation in mass
culture is part of social life, it is mistaken to think of the larger social entities as
culturally homogenous (Cohen, 1982). The experience of encountering a multiplicity
of cultures is increasingly a feature of modern living (Singleton, 1974). While cultural
identity is typically defined by locality, it may also be defined by such things as age,
class, or association with particular pursuits. The observances, rituals and material
culture built around sports such as football in Australia are an example of the latter.
Another focus of cultural identity is the large corporation.

Mass cultures, local cultures and sub-cultures intersect in complex ways. We are all, in
a sense, multicultural, since we participate not only in the mass culture, but in other
culturally defined contexts. Such intersections are exemplified in the lives of the people who were interviewed for this project:

The part-whole duality has a crucial empirical dimension too. For members are themselves aware of their belonging to different entities. Indeed, much of social life is involved with the consequences of 'plural membership': of the imperatives, strains and strategies which follow from it... Belonging is the almost inexpressibly complex experience of culture (Cohen, 1982, 16).

Distance education systems, which have the capacity to deliver mass-produced educational packages to large, dispersed populations of students, can be seen as phenomena of modernity, characterised by rationalisation of processes and relatively impersonal forms of communication (Fitzclarence and Kemmis, 1989). As such, these systems demonstrate Kimball's (1974) argument that a broad congruency can be observed between formal education systems and the cultural characteristics of a society. Indeed, education itself has been defined as the transmission of culture:

If there is any aspect of human knowledge that is uniquely distinctive of education, and that can be claimed as the major prerogative of professional educators, it is to be found in the conditions and processes associated with the transmission of culture (Kimball, 1974, 139).

Diagnosing the interpersonal problems they encounter as distance educators as symptomatic of contemporary social life, Fitzclarence and Kemmis (1989) contend that:

The challenge now appears to be to find alternative ways to think about the new social contradictions associated with the turn towards the abstract mode of ideational, social life - a trend of which distance education is manifestly a part. This requires a form of theorising that views culture in a comprehensive sense... there is need to offer a theoretical alternative to narrow, consensualist, bureaucratic and technicist approaches to thinking about education (Fitzclarence and Kemmis, 1989, 174).

Such a theoretical alternative is attempted in this thesis. The experience of off-campus study can be typified as the individualised consumption of mass-produced learning packages. However, each educational institution constitutes a culturally defined community with its own ways of doing things, some unique and others shared with other institutions participating in the culture of higher education. In the sense that an individual life history incorporates encounters with a variety of culturally defined contexts, enrolment in a course of study at tertiary level can also be construed as an

47
encounter with a particular institutional culture, and with the broader culture of higher education. By adopting this perspective, the importance of the nature of the relationship between the student and the institutional culture becomes apparent: success as a student depends on the acquisition of that culture. An appreciation of the cultural perspective is, therefore, crucial to an adequate understanding of the phenomena of distance education.

3.4.4 Institutional cultures

A comprehensive study and interpretation of the institutional cultures of Deakin University and the Gippsland Institute is beyond the scope of this thesis. The following brief discussion is intended merely to explore the question whether educational institutions can be described in cultural terms, and to indicate what the content of such a description might be.

In a recent study of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, Charlesworth et al. (1989) describe the Institute as a scientific sub-culture, a legitimate subject for anthropological research in much the same way as the micro-cultures of groups of people like the Nuer or Dinka in Africa might be. This study of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute demonstrates that interpretation in cultural terms of such an institution is not only possible but contributes a valuable dimension to the understanding of the reading public about the work of such an institution and, presumably, to the self-understanding of its members.

In a sociological case study of the Gippsland Institute, Meek (1983) characterises the Institute as a pluralistic social setting:

...there is no one all-embracing 'community' either within or without GIAE. Rather, the Institute's exogenous environment is pluralistic, consisting of numerous sub-cultures and interest groups, while within its endogenous environment, there are important social divisions with regard to profession, personal values and attitudes, academic discipline, past professional socialisation, and sex (Meek, 1983, 9).

Similarly, Singleton (1974) characterises academic institutions in anthropological terms as tribal societies:

In many ways our academic disciplines as social collectivities are like the primitive tribes with which anthropologists have traditionally dealt. They are composed of people who identify themselves and are identified by others as belonging to a particular tribe. Each disciplinary 'tribe' has a
certain territory, a language, a set of rules for guiding behaviour, a mythology, a pattern for cultural transmission, a process of initiation, a social order, a series of rituals, and a system of social stratification (Singleton, 1974, 26).

This suggests that an attempt to identify an overall institutional culture may be forcing the issue somewhat. While accepting the term ‘culture’ as of some significance in the context, Meek rejects the term ‘community’ as implying a closure and homogeneity which does not exist. However, recent events in the higher education sector in Australia provide some evidence that institutional identity is a meaningful concept for those concerned. Introducing a volume of anthropological accounts of locally-defined cultures within the national entity of the British Isles, Cohen (1982, 3) says that people become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries, that is, when they need to distinguish their separate identity. Newspaper reports of the changes in the structure of higher education brought about by federal Government policy in the years 1988–1990 provide striking evidence of the truth of Cohen’s general principle.

The pages of The Australian ‘Higher Education Supplement’ in the period April 1989 to January 1990 chronicle the series of amalgamations forced upon universities and colleges of advanced education by the policy set out by Mr. Dawkins, the Minister for Education, in his White Paper (1988). Perusal of this newspaper coverage reveals that the amalgamations exercise produced considerable anguish about institutional identity and status. Some colleges appealed to regionalism to focus their sense of identity in the face of take-over by metropolitan universities (The Australian, 5.4.1989, 16), while various members of the academic community, including the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (AVCC), were prompted to attempt to define the nature of a university (The Australian, 5.4.1989; 12.4.1989; 19.4.1989; 26.4.1989). In terms of Geertz’s definition of culture as structures of meaning, such attempts by members to articulate the meaning of university life are indicative of an awareness of cultural identity brought about by the amalgamations exercise.

In an unpublished paper written in the context of the changes to higher education instigated by the White Paper, Kelly and Palmer (1988) attempt to define ‘the idea of a university’:

Twentieth century universities are generally acknowledged to have their origins in medieval institutions of the twelfth century. The idea of a university has been kept alive in the intervening period by continuity of practices and traditions and by prominent writers and philosophers who have put forward versions of what a university is, based on a common
theme. In spite of the different viewpoints that exist now, there are essential characteristics of a university which are very much alive in the minds of academics:
1. the idea of freedom to teach and freedom to learn and hence freedom from interference by state or church
2. the idea of the supranational nature of knowledge
3. the idea of a university as a community of scholars
(Kelly and Palmer, 1988, 4-5).

This paper can be read as a statement about culture, if we take the phrase 'the idea of a university' which appears in the title as equivalent to 'the structures of meaning which constitute the culture of universities'. Culture develops through the sedimentation of practices to form traditions, so it is appropriate that the section begins with a reference to tradition. While refusing to define boundaries, the authors make a statement about the dimensions of the culture and its independence from the other powerful entities which contribute to the maintenance of the symbolic universe, the church and state. Finally, the use of the concept of community reinforces the sense of cultural identity established in the preceding sentences.

One obvious manifestation of an academic culture is the calendar, organised around recurring cycles of lecture periods, assessment and vacation times, and highlighted by particular celebrations and rituals such as graduation ceremonies. One has only to think of the special clothing worn and the titles bestowed on such occasions to recognise the existence of a highly developed symbol system indicative of a shared system of meanings. The campus, where the institutional culture is localised, can also be read for cultural meanings. The kinds of buildings found there and their design indicate both specialist activities and a particular kind of community life.

In terms of structures of meaning underlying manifestations, the period of undergraduate study has traditionally served as an initiation (originally for ruling class young men) into adulthood and into the more prestigious professions. Although certain changes such as the admission of girls and women have occurred, enrolment still signifies access to an elite organisation to which entry is restricted, and is accompanied by initiation processes. While the combined phenomena of mature-age, part-time and off-campus study constitute a significant departure from the traditional model, it is argued here that certain elements of the model are pertinent to the experience of the students who were interviewed for this project.

The experience of being a student in a formal system of higher education is still a highly structured progression from initiation/entry through recurrent cycles of
assessment to graduation. It typically involves considerable investment of time and
effort, and periodic submission to the ordeal of assessment, in the expectation of high
rewards. Academic achievement signifies intellectual ability, brings status and enhances
vocational potential. To succeed, the initiate must acquire both role-based learning and
a more general appreciation of the culture of the institution.

It is common that both the institution and the newly-inducted member fail to recognise
the extent of the informal curriculum, that is the acquisition of cultural knowledge
(Louis, 1980, 132). It is a condition of membership that in terms of subjective
consciousness, one's culture tends to disappear into the realm of the taken for granted
(Cohen, 1982). From time to time, however, people find themselves in circumstances
which provoke an awareness of culture and a need to articulate this awareness. In
institutions of higher education, the orientation of new students is such a situation, but
such awareness can also happen when normal practice becomes problematic in some
way.

Reflecting on her experience first as a teacher of English Literature and later as the
Adviser in Literacy and Study Skills at Deakin University, Meyer (1988) describes how
her attempts to grapple with what was problematic for students in essay writing
revealed that the ability to communicate in certain written forms lies at the heart of
academic culture. Realising that essay writing is made problematic for new students
because academics fail to make explicit certain of their assumptions about language
and forms of communication, she assists both students and staff by identifying the
characteristics of a system of written discourse, the 'style of the campus', as distinct
from 'the oral tradition which is the common inheritance of human kind'. Although not
framed in terms of a theory of culture, these remarks indicate an awareness of the
significance of acquisition of culture in becoming a student.

3.4.5 Socialisation and enculturation

The extent to which models of the socialisation process derived from other contexts
apply to the off-campus experience forms the substantive subject matter of this thesis.
Much of the literature on secondary socialisation, such as Schutz's (1964) description
of immigrant experience, or the literature on the socialisation of new employees to
organisational cultures, analyses the situation of the newcomer as an 'outsider' who
'enters' a new social setting. Although such literature is meant to be generalisable, it
contains an implicit assumption suggested by the terms 'insider' and 'outsider' that the
'host' culture is geographically or spatially localised, and that the newcomer is exposed
to it through immersion. The situation of off-campus students is somewhat different.
Unless they visit the campus, they do not physically enter the cultural setting at all. Rather, it comes to them, delivered to the home by the postal service, or electronically via the telephone or the computer. Further, the induction of off-campus students is recognised as neither comprehensive nor consistent: they may be perpetual strangers (Meacham, 1984) or marginal members of the institutional community (Grace, 1989).

It might be argued that this situation is so different, not only in logistics but also in degree of exposure to the institutional culture, from most of the situations in which the processes of socialisation have been studied, as to render socialisation theory inapplicable or inappropriate. Wrong (1961) argues that such theory leads to an oversocialised view of man (sic) and an over-integrated view of society. However, the position taken here is that, as (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, 175) contend, socialisation theory does not necessarily presuppose that a high degree of identification occurs. The generalised model it supplies can, therefore, productively be applied to distance education.

The term 'role' is widely used in sociology. It is a central concept in symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and the dramaturgical models used by Goffman and the school of thought called Sociology of the Absurd. Connell (1983) warns against the indiscriminate use of the term, on the basis that it is theory-laden and interpreted variously in different schools of thought. In functionalist theory, for instance, the concept of role supports a conservative perception that role-determined behaviour is important for the maintenance of social order. At the other extreme, in Sociology of the Absurd, role is associated with a theory that social life is episodic and essentially meaningless. Giddens (1976) argues that role theory in interpretive sociology ascribes a certain passivity in human behaviour.

While it is recognised that both the institutions and their new students actively participate in the processes of socialisation, the main focus of this study is the subjective reality of the newcomer. Indeed, Berger and Luckmann (1966, 158) define secondary socialisation as 'the internalisation of institutional or institution-based sub-worlds'. The associated conceptual categories of role, identity and belonging are used in this context. The use of the term is not intended to suggest that social life can be reduced to programmed behaviour, or that the individual is without the powers of agency. Rather, the construction of social life is regarded as a matter of constant negotiation, involving both agency and role-associated behaviour.

The concept of identity as something formed through the internalisation of social reality is closely associated with that of role, and with the concept of culture. Hughes
(1989) argues that the voluntary formation of support groups by off-campus students can be interpreted as a sign of their need to establish an identity within the university culture, and to integrate the role of student at a personal level. The greater proportion of women in such groups indicates, she says, that they have a greater need for the validation of the role of students which group participation can give. The operation of personal choice and agency can be seen in the degree to which an individual identifies with an institutional culture. Some off-campus students have minimum association with the institution, but for others, socialisation to the institutional culture is much more complete. At the time this study was undertaken there were members of staff at both Deakin University and the Gippsland Institute who had previously been off-campus students.

Success as an off-campus student requires not only some command of recipe knowledge and the internalisation of aspects of the objective reality of the institutional culture, but also the ability to maintain a certain subjective reality in relative isolation. In the absence of continual and consistent face-to-face contact, the maintenance of a sense of identity associated with a certain social setting is fraught with difficulty. Berger and Luckmann maintain that:

Disruption of significant conversation with the mediators of the respective plausibility structures threatens the subjective realities in question. As the example of correspondence indicates, the individual may resort to various techniques of reality-maintenance even in the absence of actual conversation, but the reality-generating potency of these techniques is greatly inferior to the face-to-face conversations they are designed to replicate (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, 174).

Moreover, Cohen (1982) says that meanings are like nebulous threads running through daily life which are felt, experienced and understood, but never explicitly expressed. He describes these meanings as ‘subterranean’ and ‘not readily accessible to the cultural outsider’ (1982, 12). If the structures of meaning which constitute culture are not readily accessible to outsiders; if off-campus students remain perpetual outsiders to their chosen institutions; and if education is the transmission of culture, then there are serious implications for distance educators in the social isolation of their students.

Discussing how well distance education systems can embody ‘the idea of a university education’ Kelly and Palmer (1988) say that certain assumptions about interpersonal relationships appear to be missing from the literature of distance education and pose the question whether addressing this lack is where the real challenge lies. They conclude that:
If it is, then we need to bring to bear a quite different body of theory in order to understand the process - on formation of groups, on affiliation and alienation, and so on, whereas the emphasis to date has been on maximising the effectiveness of the various media used for instruction (Kelly and Palmer, 1988, 16).

The significance of this and the following chapters lies in the contribution made to such a body of theory and its demonstrated applicability to the substantive area of student experience.
CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 The research design and process

The research project on which this thesis is based illustrates the application of hermeneutic principles and methods in its design, process and interpretive methodology. Three aspects of the project are discussed in terms of hermeneutics: the cyclic pattern of the research design and process; the treatment of interviews as texts for interpretation in context; and the principles and practice of the researcher's relationship with the other participants.

Quantitative research is guided by a clearly defined set of procedures called the hypothetico-deductive method which reflects its underlying epistemological principles. Ideally, such a research project proceeds through the following stages in a linear fashion: definition of research problem, formulation of hypotheses, operational decision-making, design of research instrument, collection and analysis of data, and finally, statement of conclusions and results in terms of the problem as originally defined (Spradley, 1980, 27).

There is a corresponding close association between epistemology and methodology in the research literature of the 'alternative' paradigm, but methodology is less clearly defined. Many qualitative researchers refuse, like Parlett and Hamilton (1976, 13), to formulate any 'standard methodological package', preferring instead to discuss their 'general research strategy'. There are good reasons for this. The kind of research design and methodology commonly prescribed for quantitative research is criticised as an ideal formulation which not only denies the irregularities of actual research practice but also precludes the use as research data of much interesting material (Johnson, 1975; Oakley 1981; Cook and Fonow 1986). Rather than try to control for, or eliminate variables in the research setting or data which are outside the scope of the original hypothesis, qualitative researchers seek to take advantage of unforeseen developments and idiosyncratic circumstances. To do this they require flexibility in research design and freedom to adapt their methods to the particular circumstances of the setting.

Many qualitative and ethnographic researchers describe their research as evolving through progressive modifications occasioned by unforeseen events in the field and by the reflective act of reporting. Johnson (1975, 25), talks about 'the emergent and problematic nature of field research'. Smith (1978, 333), discusses how accidental occurrences in the initial stages influenced the focus of his work. In the preface to their pioneering work on illuminative evaluation Parlett and Hamilton describe their work as
"heuristically organised": the researchers progressively focusing and redefining the areas of inquiry as the study unfolds, in the light of accumulating experience and as the crucial issues to be studied become uncovered (Parlett and Hamilton, 1976, iii).

The cyclic pattern of such a process is more explicitly recognised by some (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Hutchinson, 1988, 134). Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, 175) use the descriptive image of a funnel, and Spradley (1980, 28) illustrates his discussion of the research process with a circular figure which features progressive phases of data gathering, analysis and reporting. However, few researchers identify this well-documented cyclic pattern with the process of understanding known as the hermeneutic circle (Lindholm, 1981, 92; Veit-Brause, 1980, 131; Gadamer, 1976, 118). This is surprising, in view of the fact that this concept provides a pattern for research design which satisfies the epistemological principles which guide qualitative research. It accommodates an approach which is exploratory in intention rather than goal-oriented; which gives positive recognition to the subjective prejudice and tacit knowledge of the researcher; and which acknowledges that the direction of the research is propelled by a dynamic interaction between the researcher, established theory, and substantive issues in the research setting.

Recognition that the process exemplifies the hermeneutic circle gives access to a range of philosophical and methodological considerations which can contribute to conceptual enrichment and a clearer understanding of methodological issues.

4.1.1 The hermeneutic circle

In proposing the hermeneutic circle as a conceptual model for research processes, it is not suggested that it constitutes a precise set of methodological procedures as some kind of equivalent to the standard scientific hypothetico-deductive method. While such endeavours may have occupied nineteenth century philosophers such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey, the scope of hermeneutics has been extended in the twentieth century and freed from its preoccupation with methodologism, notably by Gadamer and Ricoeur (Linge, 1977, xii).

The concept of the hermeneutic circle, or spiral as some authors (Lindholm, 1981, 87; Veit-Brause, 1980, 69) describe it, is a generalised model which illustrates the circularity of the processes by which understanding develops and the concept that the part is always to be understood in relation to the whole. The circle symbolises the idea
that the search for meaning is a process of ever-widening horizons (Lindholm, 1981, 96-102), and the modern concept of a matrix of interacting horizons of meaning (Gadamer, 1976, 120) which envelop author, text and reader; or, in the case of a research project, researcher, subjects and reader.

The hermeneutic concept of understanding as symbolised by the circle or spiral is founded on recognition of the fact that there can be no development of knowledge without foreknowledge:

- All understanding presupposes in the person who understands as a condition of its possibility, an analogue of that which actually will be understood later; an original, antecedent congruity between subject and object (von Humbolt, 1973, 15-16).

Heidegger (1962, 194-195) describes the hermeneutic circle as the movement between preunderstanding, that sense of the totality of something possessed at the beginning of the interpretive process, and informed understanding. As applied to the hermeneutic situation of a research project, the circular pattern describes the path of the intellectual journey of the researcher through progressive stages of engagement with the field of study. In such a pattern the evolving direction of the project is produced by the tensions between various factors such as the researcher’s conscious purpose, the tacit assumptions and value systems which guide his or her approach, and the accumulating substantive data. Working with the relationship between these factors and one’s sense of the totality of the subject matter constitutes the traditional hermeneutical tacking procedure, or constant referencing between text and context:

- In order to understand the meaning of the parts one must have some premonition of the whole, but this premonition is also influenced by our interpretation of the parts (Lindholm, 1981, 92).

The progressive incorporation of new data and refinement of theory produce a kind of lateral thrust which deflects the process and produces a circular action. In such a situation the researcher is repeatedly brought back to the point of entry. However, each time, the original question is apprehended differently because of the nature of the intervening journey. The hermeneutic circle then becomes a spiral, and it is worth noting that the symbol of the spiral, expressing as it does both circular and linear motion, embodies the concept of progress in understanding.

The model of the hermeneutic circle was adopted in the design of this research project. The point of entry was the desire to understand the meaning of the first year experience of off-campus study from the point of view of the student. A basic pattern of three or
four cycles of information gathering within a larger cyclic pattern was established by conducting successive interviews with the same small group of people over a period which encompassed the completion of one academic year and the beginning of another. The timing of the visits was planned to coincide as closely as possible with significant events of the academic year: initial exposure to the new experience, the first assessment period, completion of the year and progress into a second year. The intervals between the cycles of interviews were periods for working on interpretation and analysis of data, the development of emergent theory, further reading and preliminary writing of findings. Such work was essential to refine the focus of subsequent interviews and shape the evolving direction of the overall project.

The design was flexible enough to allow for modification to occur in response to circumstances in accordance with the epistemological principles guiding qualitative research mentioned above. In the event, the original plan was adhered to quite closely. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the first round of interviews took place between January and March 1988, the second between April and June and the third round between October and December of that year. Changes in the researcher's personal circumstances necessitated that the fourth round, intended for the following February, was postponed to November 1989.

The locus for the beginning of the cyclic journey of understanding is the conscious and unconscious foreknowledge which informs the approach to the task of understanding and constitutes the researcher's 'prejudice' (Gadamer, 1977). Rather than being regarded as a source of bias to be eliminated or corrected, prejudice is accepted positively in hermeneutics as a necessary and inevitable precondition of knowing, and the source of the questions which initiate the journey of understanding. From this position, progress involves becoming open to the new and, at the same time, in the encounter with the new, one's prejudice is progressively revealed:

The nature of the hermeneutical experience is not that something is outside and desires admission. Rather, we are possessed by something and precisely by means of it we are opened up for the new, the different, the true (Gadamer, 1977, 9).

In this sense, all understanding is essentially self-understanding, a process which has no ending (Ricoeur, 1981, 158), an open-ended spiral rather than a closed circle (Lindholm, 1981, 87).

One source of prejudice which influenced the development of the questions which propelled this project was the researcher's previous relationship with off-campus
students in the capacity of External Students' Liaison Officer at the University of Queensland, which left a residue of enduring interests and unresolved questions:

Among the enduring interests is a fascination with what I call the sociology of distance education... My questions are about what it means to be an outsider in any given cultural context, and about how institutions can most successfully integrate their external students (Grace, 1989, 71).

A second source of prejudice was the gender of the researcher. As argued in Chapter 3, in Gadamer's terms, gender must constitute prejudice because it provides 'an initial schematisation for all our possibilities of knowing' (Gadamer, 1977, 13). The self-understanding to which the hermeneutic circle led in this instance was a growing realisation of the fundamental and all-pervasive effect of the experience of being feminine on the approach taken to both substantive and methodological aspects of the project.

The refinement of the focus on gender issues in this project is particularly associated with events which took place between the completion of the first and the beginning of the third series of interviews. The period of transcribing and interpreting the first round of interviews coincided with further readings in feminist literature. In particular, the insights of Belenky and colleagues (1986) helped to frame the themes which emerged from repeated listening to the interviews with some of the women students. A crucial event was the second interview with Betty, a capable woman with many years' nursing experience who evidenced considerable anxiety about entering higher education. The application of the metaphor of voice developed by these researchers to the phenomenon of anxiety as evidenced by several of the women students is elaborated in Chapters 6 and 7.

The emergence of gender as a conceptual theme illustrates how hermeneutic understanding develops by means of a constant referencing between text and context in such a way that 'lived experience and conceptual comprehension illuminate and fulfil each other' (Veit-Brause, 1980, 131). In this case the lived experience of the researcher is the encounter with the life-world of another person which is illuminated when placed in the context of feminist literature. Researchers familiar with Glaser and Strauss's work on the generation of grounded theory (1967, 32-43) will recognise a similar process described in different terminology.

As mentioned above, the point of arrival in the hermeneutic circle is a deepened awareness of one's situation, which becomes the starting point for further exploration (Veit-Brause, 1980, 69).
Towards the end of the interviewing process a dimension of the students' personal context to which little consideration had been given increasingly claimed attention. The children of the student participants were making their presences felt both in the event of the interview and on the tape-recordings. Except for one instance in which a student's teenage sons were asked for their opinions about their mother's return to study, the children's presence in the first and second rounds of interviews had been regarded as incidental. Their voices on the tape-recordings had been treated as interruptions to be 'edited out' of the transcripts. They had not been recognised as part of the symbol system of the interviews.

Recognition that the presence of the children in the study constituted part of the message of the text (Thompson, 1981, 6) opened a new and unexpected theme. Its contribution to the self-understanding of the researcher was illuminated by feminist literature: no self-respecting feminist researcher could edit out the children. To do so would be to make them invisible in the same way that patriarchal research makes women invisible (Belenky et al. 1986; Smith, 1979; Spender, 1981b). As well as indicating the beginning of another spiral in the hermeneutic process, the emergence of the theme of parenthood illustrates the influence of consciousness on perception. In this case an anticipated birth in the observer's immediate family circle doubtless affected the degree of her sensitivity to the theme.

By paying close attention to those aspects of the text which are unexpected or apparently irrelevant, a change in self-understanding is achieved through empathy and a cognitive appreciation of otherness. The researcher is opened to the new in a way which precipitates the beginning of the next cycle of understanding.

4.2 The conduct and interpretation of interviews

4.2.1 The principles of reflexivity and reciprocity

In Chapter 3 it is argued that the differences between positivist social science and those methodologies which reflect an alternative paradigm hinge on the issue of objectivity, which is a recurring theme in phenomenology, hermeneutics and critical theory from Husserl, Heidegger and Schutz to Gadamer, Ricoeur and Habermas. The assumption of the ontological separation of the observer from the observed is implicit in positivist research methodology, whereas the reflexivity of the research act is asserted by phenomenological social scientists (Johnson, 1975; Silverman, 1972; Douglas, 1985); critical scientists in education (Carr and Kemmis, 1983) and by many feminist researchers (Cook and Fonow, 1986; Dueti Klein, 1983; du Bois, 1983; Kirkup, 1983, 6; Reinhart, 1979; Rich, 1979; Spender, 1980; Stanley and Wise, 1983b).
It is fundamentally important to realise that the principle of reflexivity applies to the event of the research interview. That is, the interview is both a social construct (McKee and O’Brien, 1983, 149) and a social process (Middleton, 1988, 141). To discuss the practicalities of the conduct of interviews without giving due consideration to the principles which should govern the relationship between the people who take part would be to ignore this. It follows that the methodology of interviewing is based primarily on interpersonal skills. A sensitivity to the circumstances of the interviewee and an appreciation of the complexity of the factors affecting human relationships are required in any interview situation.

Much of the criticism of the ‘standard’, ‘traditional’ or ‘conventional’ interview (terms variously used to describe interviewing practice which conforms to the formats prescribed in behaviourist social science), focuses on the question of the asymmetry of power in the researcher-researched relationship.

In a standard interview respondents are presented with a predetermined scheme of relevances... all introduced, framed, and specified by interviewers, who determine the adequacy and appropriateness of responses. Finally, researchers through their analyses of reports define the ‘meaning’ of responses and findings... This way of doing research takes away from respondents their right to ‘name’ their world... Stated somewhat extremely and from the perspective of respondents, interview research, by excluding the biographical rooting and contextual grounding of respondents’ personal and social webs of meaning bears a resemblance to a ‘degradation ceremony’... or an identity-stripping process... (Mishler, 1986, 122).

Feminists have been particularly concerned about the quality of relationships in the research situation, condemning conventional methodology as depersonalising, exploitative and patronising (McRobbie, 1982, 51; Laws, 1978, 3).

Feminism either directly states or implies that the personal is political; that the personal and the everyday are important and interesting and must be the subject of feminist enquiry; that other people’s realities mustn’t be downgraded sneered at or otherwise patronised; that feminists must attempt to reject the scientist/person dichotomy and, in doing so, must endeavour to dismantle the power relationships which exist between the researched and researcher (Stanley and Wise, 1983b, 101-103).

The assumption on the part of the interviewer of the right to define the situation, to establish the agenda and frame the issues creates asymmetry of power, but it is naive to
assume that interviewees are powerless to use the situation for their own ends. By demonstrating that in actuality interviewees actively use the interview situation, the feminist critique exposes an implicit assumption that the interviewee’s role is a passive one and simultaneously explodes this assumption as a myth. For example, Oakley (1981) and Swarbrick (1978a, 64) report that the women they interviewed often asked questions, and both acknowledge the information needs of interviewees and the researcher’s obligation to reciprocate. McKee and O’Brien (1983) note the effect of gender differences on the interview relationship, and maintain that males are more likely to attempt to manipulate and control the situation.

The paucity of terms available to designate the participants in an interview makes it difficult to avoid using terms such as ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’, ‘interviewer’ and ‘interviewee’, which imply an active and a passive role. Such difficulties expose assumptions which derive from the positivist paradigm and are encoded in the language of scholarship.

Feminists are not alone in recognising that respondents have their own agendas and are active participants. Lewis (1986, 26) describes interviews as ‘dynamic and reciprocal affairs’, while Wade reports:

...subjects frequently use interactions with an observer for reasons not expressed in the purposes of the study. On their own initiative, subjects will shape and use observers to serve their own interests and needs and will adjust the research relationship to those ends (Wade, 1984, 213).

The thrust of such critiques of traditional research is to establish reciprocity as a guiding principle for the conduct of interviews:

Typically, the relationship between the observer and the subject is weighted by some sense of mutual reward, both direct and indirect. This bond requires the observer to ‘pay dues’ (i.e., reciprocate) for the intrusion into the subject’s life in the setting (Wade, 1984, 222).

Another potential source of power imbalance is the use of probing techniques:

...because interviewing is a most penetrative way of gaining information from and about people there is a need for rules to control both the acquisition and subsequent use of interview data (Simons, 1982, 116).

Here again, it should not be assumed that interviewees are helpless victims of probing interviewers. On the contrary, they can be adept at subverting the interviewer’s intentions, as Oakley (1981, 56) and Douglas (1985, 149-158) both attest. However,
being alert to such ploys as lying and misinformation can in turn lead the interviewer into the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1981), a problem which is addressed below (4.2.3.4) in the context of interpretive methods.

The rights of both participants can be protected by negotiation (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 104-195; McDonald and Sanger, 1982, 11; Tripp, 1983, 7), but this is not to say that the relationship can be simplified or protected from the complexities of personal involvement. As Oakley (1981); Wade (1984); Douglas (1985); and Middleton (1988) attest, personal involvement is not just an inescapable feature of interviewing, it has positive value. Moreover, such involvement inevitably introduces the dimension of emotions and feelings, a dimension which empiricist traditions deliberately exclude from the research process:

On the whole, it is impossible to review the literature about methods in the social sciences without reaching the conclusion that 'having feelings' is like an incest taboo in sociological research (Johnson, 1975, 147).

Feminists ascribe the existence of such a taboo to the dominance of the patriarchal paradigm:

Another way to approach this question of the masculinity of the 'proper' interview is to observe that a sociology of feelings does not exist (Oakley, 1981, 40).

With respect to the participants' willingness to be open about personal thoughts and feelings, it is worth remembering that the situation may demand adherence to the principle of reciprocity. Interviewees' sense of fair exchange is likely to operate to the detriment of the relationship and the quality of information offered if they perceive the relationship to be imbalanced in this respect (Bogdan and Taylor 1975, 107).

Clearly, the nature of the relationships which a researcher tries to develop with those he/she interviews depends not only on ideology but also on pragmatic considerations dictated by circumstances. Even the face-to-face survey, which has been criticised above as depersonalising and exploitative, can be defended as the most appropriate method in certain situations. If factual information is required, it may be the least intrusive way of obtaining it. On the other hand, collaborative models such as those developed by feminists (Stanley and Wise, 1983b) and critical social scientists (Carr and Kemmis, 1983), which are intended to empower participants, may not be appropriate or practical in some settings (Kirkup, 1983).

The main factors likely to affect relationships are the politics of the research setting, the kind of knowledge sought and the amount of contact required. If the knowledge
acquired in interviews is to be used for evaluation purposes, for example, the issue of power in the relationship becomes a sensitive one. If the researcher wants access to knowledge in the personal domain which is usually protected by the veil of privacy, then a high degree of trust and intimacy must be achieved. Such things may be very difficult to establish in a single interview.

In this project the researcher had a controlling influence on the definition of relationships because the basic features of the research, including the focus on the experience of learning and the choice of methodology were determined before the participants were selected. These features, including the research topic, the status of the project as a doctoral program endorsed by the institutions at which the students had applied to enrol, and the level of commitment asked of the interviewees were mentioned in the initial letters which invited students to take part (Appendices B, C and D). Within these parameters, however, there were opportunities for the exercise of choice and for individual differences in the definition of the research event and development of relationships.

While the participants did not identify with the project or assume responsibility for it in a way which could be expected in a cooperatively designed project, the principle of reciprocity consciously or unconsciously adopted by the students ensured that there was some sense of joint ownership and interest in outcomes. Several of the people selected made it clear that they welcomed the opportunity to participate because they thought it would have a beneficial effect on their motivation and progress. As the project developed, encouraging interest was expressed in its progress and in the completion of the doctorate.

The politics of the situation were not particularly contentious. The student participants were aware of the researcher's affiliation with Deakin University as a postgraduate student and staff member, but seemed to accept without any major reservations the assurances offered at the first interview that the interview material would be treated confidentially and that they would be given an opportunity to read the reported findings before publication. They knew that the knowledge gleaned would not be made available to academic staff in any way which could affect their student careers, and that the findings were to be reported in a doctoral thesis, which, although a public document, does not have a wide readership.

The most sensitive aspect of the relationships, from the researcher's point of view, was the difference between the conversational and discursive style of interviewing, and the penetrative nature of the interpretive method brought to bear on the recorded conversations.
While the research topic was defined in the initial letter as the experience of learning, and many of the interviewer's questions were clearly related to this topic, the interviews were deliberately conducted as two-way conversations which were allowed to digress and evolve fairly freely:

All interviews create their own content. And this characteristic of interviewing has led many investigators to attempt to standardise interviews (and interviewers). An interview's content is produced in the course of talk, first, in the questions asked (and the questions not asked), and, second, in the ways the questions are asked: whether they are open or closed questions; whether they are probing or discontinuous questions. What distinguishes in-depth interviewing is that the answers given continually inform the evolving conversation. Knowledge thus accumulates with many turns at talk. It collects in stories, asides, hesitations, expressions of feeling, and spontaneous associations.

In-depth interviews probe the content of replies sometimes across long stretches of discourse. By contrast survey interviews unfold as discrete and discontinuous units of inquiry, each unit bearing no necessary or logical relation to the one before (Paget, 1983, 78).

This style was employed in order to generate contextual material about the students' present circumstances and life histories; to find out where the interviewees would lead the conversation and to enable them to express the experience of higher education in their own terms. The ethical issues created by submitting texts so produced to a rigorous interpretive process are discussed below in the context of interpretation.

The participants' reactions to the interpretive process proved to be less sensitive than expected. When interpretations of previous conversations were offered in the second and subsequent interviews the result was usually confirmation accompanied by an increase in trust and rapport. In an effort to offer opportunities to negotiate over the reporting of the research, some preliminary findings in the form of a conference paper were circulated to all of the participants in 1988, followed by more extended notes towards the thesis early in 1989, and two more conference papers in 1989 and 1991. Finally a draft copy of the three chapters of the thesis in which the interview material was reported was sent to each participant. Overall there was a paucity of feedback, but no adverse feeling or sense of invasion of privacy or betrayal of confidence was expressed. This reaction could be interpreted as lack of interest or as evidence that the material was handled with extreme discretion or that the students were simply too busy.
4.2.2 The hermeneutics of the interview situation

Interpretive methods are commonly employed in every-day social encounters, as well as in encounters with works of history, art, literature and theatre. Such events can be defined as hermeneutic situations in that:

the implied, the hidden, the connative meanings and intentions have to be appreciated to get the full import of the information communicated (Vcit-Brause, 1980, 54).

By this definition, the research interview is clearly a hermeneutic situation. However, few 'qualitative' researchers indicate that they can identify it as such, although much of their criticism of conventional theory and practice raises questions about issues which are central in hermeneutic theory, such as understanding (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 7-8; Simons, 1982, 119), meaning (MacDonald and Sanger, 1982, 2), perception (Douglas, 1985, 39), contextuality (Mishler, 1986, 117-120; Reinharz, 1979, 356; Simons, 1982, 111-116), objectivity (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, 8-9; Lewis, 1986, 26; Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1983b), and relatedness (McKee and O'Brien, 1983; Middleton, 1988; Mishler, 1986; Kirkup, 1983; Oakley, 1981).

The words 'standard', 'traditional' and 'dominant' are commonly ascribed by such authors to unacceptable interviewing theory and practice. Broadly speaking, such terms designate methodology influenced by the positivist tradition which is predicated on two assumptions: that it is possible to control all the meaningful events in a research situation, and that it is necessary to do so in order to ensure objectivity (Douglas, 1985, 18). In its extreme form, such an approach results in the face-to-face survey.

Researchers who are in the process of elaborating an 'alternative' paradigm find the 'standard' definition of the interview problematic because of their awareness of the complexities of meaning. Three aspects of this complexity, which are subjects for debate in the literature of hermeneutics, are also recognised variously in the 'alternative' literature about interviewing. They are: the contextuality of meaning; the penetration of facades to reveal hidden meanings; and the role of both the one who tells and the one who hears in the production of meanings.

Bogdan and Taylor (1975, 7) write of the importance of using 'personal documents', including interviews, to 'allow us to see people in the context of their whole lives'. Simons (1982, 120-121); Popc and Denicolo (1986, 155) and Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, 118) discuss the value of the situational context of interviews as a source of clues for the interpretation of meaning. Both Douglas (1985) and Mishler
(1986) go further than this. In their different ways, both argue that the implications of the understanding that meanings are always situated, or contextually grounded, require a radical transformation of the traditional approach to interviewing. For Mishler, this leads to questions about the empowerment of respondents, whereas Douglas directs the reader to the complexities of discovering hidden meanings.

The fact that the conduct and interpretation of interviews involves the search for hidden meanings, the penetration of facades, is mentioned by Simons (1982, 111, 122-128) and discussed at length by Douglas (1985). Cockburn notes that this characteristic is shared by several research traditions but is apparently unaware of Ricoeur’s work on psychoanalysis and structuralism (Ricoeur, 1970, 1973, 1978):

So Wolcott’s ethnography, like the Levi-Strauss school of anthropology, like Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology and like Marxism and psychoanalysis postulates an order of reality beyond the conscious and reflective states of intelligence. That order determines the order of everyday experience and is glimpsed by research acts which penetrate the world of common sense (Cockburn, 1983, 6, emphasis added).

The creation of meaning as a joint construction of both the teller and the told (Ricoeur, 1970) is discussed by Tripp (1983), who is exceptional among the case study researchers in the field of education in framing his argument in terms of hermeneutic theory. This issue is also explored by Simons (1982, 120) and MacDonald and Sanger (1982, 1) who do not indicate familiarity with the literature of hermeneutics. Simons and MacDonald and Sanger illustrate their discussions of interview methodology by quoting the same passage from A Compass Error, a novel by Sybille Bedford. This passage so aptly encapsulates the hermeneutics of the interview situation that it is worth repeating:

For the second time that day, deliberately now, Flavia said, ‘It takes two to tell the truth.’
‘One for one side, one for the other?’
‘That’s not what I mean. I mean one to tell, one to hear. A speaker and a receiver. To tell the truth about any complex situation requires a certain attitude in the receiver.’
‘What is required from the receiver?’
‘I would say first of all a level of emotional intelligence.’
‘Imagination?’
‘Disciplined.’
‘Sympathy? Attention?’
‘And patience.’
'Detachment?'
'All of these. And a taste for the truth - an immense willingness to see.'
'Wouldn't it be simpler,' he said, 'just to write it down?'
'Postulating a specific reader-receiver?'
'Casting a wider net: one or more among an unknown quantity of readers.'
Quite cheerfully now, Flavia said, 'You forget that I am a writer. Writers
don't just write it down. They have to give it a form.'
He said, 'Well, do.'
'Life is often too... peculiar for fiction. Form implies a measure of
selection.'
He pleased her by catching on, 'At the expense of the truth?'
'Never essentially. At the expense of the literal truth.'
'Does the literal truth matter?'
She thought about that. 'To the person to whom it happened.' (Bedford,
1968, 18-19 original emphasis).

Having recognised the interview as a hermeneutic situation, one in which the
problematic nature of meaning is acknowledged, it remains to explore the practicalities
of contextual interpretation.

4.2.3 Interpretation of text in context

The hermeneutic model for the process of achieving understanding by relating the part
to the whole is the interpretation of texts. In this research project, the tape-recorded
interview conversation is treated as a text which is interpreted in the context of the
research process in general and the event of the interview in particular. Meanings
encoded in the spoken content emerge when a phenomenological consciousness is
brought to bear on the event of the interview. The approach adopted can be understood
in terms of three elements of Husserl's phenomenological method: the reduction,
intuiting of essences and intentionality (Husserl, 1965).

4.2.3.1 The event of the interview as context

To treat the event of the interview as context the researcher must be able to operate the
phenomenological reduction, in the Husserlian sense. The practice of the reduction
requires an ability to make problematic the world of everyday life, or the world
taken-for-granted. As mentioned above, the hermeneutic method begins with the
consciousness of the researcher, and is a matter of perception, or prejudice, to use
Gadamer's term. In Husserl's terms, this consciousness constitutes intentionality. In
this instance, the operation of the reduction was assisted by a consciousness grounded in a background in literature and drama, which facilitated an appreciation of the interview event as a dramatic artefact. The experience of being a woman was also an advantage in terms of achieving a phenomenological reduction. As Oakley (1981) has argued, the traditional criteria for research interviewing are expressions of a masculine paradigm, and are therefore almost by definition experienced as problematic by women.

In addition to the positive effect of these prejudices, an ability to practise the reduction in respect to the event of the interview was enhanced by readings in phenomenological sociology in which encounters are defined metaphorically as rituals, dramas or games. The works of Erving Goffman, and the schools of Ethnomethodology and Sociology of the Absurd have been the most influential.

Goffman (1969) uses a dramaturgical model to analyse social interaction. His thesis is that social situations are the collaborative production of human actors. He reveals the accomplished nature of everyday life by examining how the participants in interactions work at such things as impression management and the negotiation and maintenance of definitions of situations (1969, 242-251) and contends that strategy and ritual are elements of all encounters (1967, 1972).

It is productive to think about interviews in dramaturgical terms when trying to interpret the meaning of the spoken content. All sorts of clues as to what was ‘really’ going on in the encounter become apparent if one analyses the interaction in terms such as staging, role-playing and dramatic inter-play. One can generate questions which produce insights as to the nature of the event by thinking about such things as the dynamics of the conversation, the dramatic structure of the scene, the use of space, the feeling tone and the kind of language and gesture used. Was there evidence of scene-setting? How did the ‘actors’ dispose themselves? What were the seating arrangements? What roles were assumed? Did the situation seem natural or contrived? What were the dynamics of the conversation in terms of initiating new topics, turn-taking and interrupting? To what topics did the interviewee lead the conversation? Did the interviewee take an active or passive role? What do dramaturgical elements such as body language, and the use of space, reveal about power relationships? Was the demeanor deferential or assertive? What was the dramatic structure of the encounter? Was there a sense of completion? Did the interview end abruptly, or was there evidence that one participant was reluctant to finish it? Did the conversation continue after the recorder was switched off? What was the off-the-record conversation about?
Sociology of the Absurd is committed to the study of how human beings strive to make meaning of a senseless world. This school offers a game model of social encounters in which human beings are presented as goal-seeking, voluntaristic, intentional actors engaged in activity which is episodic and arbitrary, having no meaning apart from that which the actors ascribe to it (Lyman and Scott, 1970, 3-5). Applying such a perspective to the situation of a research interview enhances one’s awareness of game-like qualities in interaction, such as the manipulation of events for goals and pay-offs. It heightens the researcher’s sensitivity to the possibility of contrivance and masking. However, such an awareness should not be accompanied by a suspicious or judgmental attitude, and ethical considerations must be respected.

Ethnomethodologists give organised accounts of the routine grounds of everyday action to expose the interpretive schemes and methods of constructing meaning employed by social actors (Lyman and Scott, 1970, 25). As Silverman (1972, 166) says, phenomenological research is ‘committed to an exploration of the obvious’. The common-place is deceptive because it is taken for granted, and making it problematic reveals meanings which normality obscures. Familiarity with phenomenological social science is especially useful when interpreting interviews which at first yield very little in terms of deeper level meanings and which appear to be operating at a straightforward if rather superficial level until a phenomenological reduction is achieved.

4.2.3.2 The recorded interview as text

Ricoeur distinguishes between spoken conversation and written texts on the grounds that ‘the realisation of discourse in writing nevertheless involves a series of characteristics which effectively distance the text from the conditions of spoken discourse’ (Thompson in Ricoeur, 1981, 13). A written text is a work, a structured totality produced in accordance with a series of rules which define its literary genre (Ricoeur, 1981, 131-145, 146-165). Bedford (1968) makes this point in the passage from Δ

Compass Error quoted above:

Flavia said, ‘You forget that I am a writer. Writers don’t just write it down. They have to give it form.’

He said, ‘Well, do.’

‘Life is often too...peculiar for fiction. Form implies a measure of selection.’ (Bedford, 1968, 19).

Nevertheless, there are arguments for considering the conversation which takes place in an interview as a text. Whereas spoken conversation is normally an ephemeral phenomenon, the use of the tape recorder enables the spoken content of the convers-
ation to be captured and transcribed into a written form. Whether this transcription of the conversation then constitutes a text in the sense defined by Ricoeur is arguable, but there are certainly some senses in which it can be regarded and treated as a text.

Ordinary conversation can be regarded as a text in that it is produced by the work of the participants who employ the culturally determined rules and conventions which they perceive to be appropriate for the given situation. Interactionist sociology such as that mentioned above reveals how such learned procedures and conventions are routinely employed in everyday social interaction. The existence of such rules is evident in the etiquette of 'polite' society, and in literary works such as the novels of Jane Austin or the plays of Oscar Wilde, which reproduce conversation heightened to the status of an art form.

The argument for regarding interviews as texts is supported by Mishler (1986) and Paget (1983) who both define the interview as a discourse, jointly produced by the participants. Beginning with a concern for contextual effects, Mishler examines the way meanings emerge and are shaped by the developing discourse of the interview and identifies narrative elements in interviewee accounts. Paget explicitly refers to the record of the interview conversation as a text. She supports her argument with detailed examination of the transcripts of an interview and shows how the form and quality of her responses help to shape the interviewee's story, thereby demonstrating the process of the co-production of meaning.

Ricoeur's work on the reading of the text of the dream in *Freud and Philosophy* (1970) is relevant to this discussion of the research interview transcript as text. Both Ricoeur and Habermas (1972) examined the relevance of the relationship between therapist and analysand in psychoanalysis as a model for the researcher-subject relationship. Ricoeur points out that the text for interpretation in Freudian analysis is the text of the dream account, not the dream itself. To the extent that the research situation is analogous to that of analysis, the client's dream is analogous to the student's story:

...some kind of the text is story, like a myth. But the model of the 'text' can be extended. It can include, as well as the recounting of a particular dream, the whole life experience of the analysand as finally expressed and clarified. It can also include the total work of 'reading' or understanding performed by the analyst... The model of the text serves to show up the part played by both the 'author' here the analysand and the reader (Dunphy, 1980, 97).
Taking the student's story as given in interview as analogous with the text of the dream account in analysis, it follows that the focus of the researcher's attention is the story, not the person who tells it. Differentiating the story from the teller is a subtle distinction, but one which has important implications for the ethics of the research relationship. In Ricoeur's words:

> What must be understood in a story is not first the one who speaks behind the text, but that which is spoken about, the subject matter of the text, that is, the sort of world that the work lays out in front of the text (Ricoeur, 1978, 155, original emphasis)

There is an important difference between the treatment of a written text, that is, a work of art, and a research interview in terms of Ricoeur's concept of distanciation. According to Ricoeur, 'writing renders the text autonomous with respect to the intention of the author' (1981, 139). In other words, the text takes on a life of its own, and has meanings which are independent of the subjectivity of its author. It 'opens itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in different socio-cultural conditions' (1981, 139). However, in the hermeneutic situation of the research interview, while the transcript of the interview does constitute a text, for the purposes of the researcher/reader who makes the initial interpretation, it cannot be treated as emancipated from the interlocutors and circumstances of the dialogical situation. To the extent that transcripts are read by other readers, such as the interviewees or readers of the research report, then distanciation does occur, but the researcher's task requires that the text of the interview be considered in the context of the dialogical situation (Douglas, 1985, Mishler, 1986).

Such an interpretation should reveal both the subjective meanings of the participants and the extent to which meanings are shared. In this respect the interpretive process resembles more closely the earlier hermeneutics of Dilthey and Schleiermacher. It has been argued above that the ability to make such an interpretation depends to some extent on the researcher's appreciation of the interview as an artefact. Traditional or conventional approaches to the research interview are deficient in this respect and are 'naïve' in the Husserlian sense.

4.2.3.3 Interpretive method

The process of active listening used for the interpretation of interview material involved repeated hearings of each audio-taped recording. On some occasions the interviews were listened to in a relaxed or reflective frame of mind, to gain an overall impression or to note obvious features and themes, but in the main listening was very concentrated and constantly interrupted for detailed note-taking. In the first instance, at
least one of the interviews with each participant was given what will hereafter be referred to as the 'holistic' interpretive treatment. The purpose of the holistic interpretation was to distil 'intuitive essences' (Husserl, 1965). In each case, an attempt was made, by relating each part to the rest of the interview, to discover the essential message of the text, or to find a metaphor which would express the interpreter's characterisation of the student. Each of the interviews was then considered in longitudinal relation to the other interviews with the same student. In this way the process of negotiation of meanings and the developing relationship between the participants could be traced as the researcher's interpretations were offered to the student for comment during subsequent interviews. In addition, a thematic analysis was made of the spoken content of all the interviews.

Essentially such an interpretive process involves an intensive working with the material, mentally immersing oneself in the worlds created by the informants' stories, until the meanings behind the words emerge. Few detailed descriptions of the techniques involved exist in the literature, though the process can be recognised in some accounts:

The very process of recopying the women's words, reading them with our eyes, typing them with our fingers, remembering the sounds of the voices when the words were first spoken helped us to hear meanings in the words that had previously gone unattended. We moved back and forth between these excerpts and the unabridged interviews. This enabled us to maintain a dual perspective, hearing the statements as exemplars of a particular epistemological position but hearing them also in the context of the woman's whole story. Slowly we were able to hear how differently each theme was construed by women with different ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1986, 17).

The word 'intuitive' has been used to describe the way insights into meanings emerge (Kelly and Shapcott (Grace), 1986). Without wishing either to denigrate or to define intuition, the following description attempts to make more explicit the methods by which 'intuitive' interpretations are achieved. The method is based on the premise that in ordinary social encounters human beings transmit and record a wide range of information, much of which is not brought to the level of conscious awareness. Such a premise is supported by psychological studies of phenomena such as body language and neuro-linguistic programming. Treating the interview as problematic, that is, performing the phenomenological reduction, helps to make this information more accessible to the conscious mind. It is then used to interrogate the spoken content of the interview in a way which may generate 'intuitive' insights.
For each of the interviews which were interpreted holistically, notes were made on a single large sheet of paper which was divided vertically into two columns (Appendix E). By this simple tabulation the results of the hermeneutic tacking process between text and context were made available at a glance. Comments about context, that is, the interview event, were recorded in the left hand column, and the right hand column was used for annotations about subject-matter under four broad headings: induction process; self; self and others; self and learning. Comments and questions which expressed or were directed towards the essential message were recorded across the bottom of the page. On many occasions these ‘summing up’ comments were inconclusive. The interpretive process frequently generated more questions than answers, thus providing material for probing questions in subsequent interviews.

Headings and cue questions in the left-hand column included the following: overall tone of the interview (for example, relaxed, formal, friendly); dramatic presentations (roles presented, staging); dynamics (turn-taking, active and passive styles of participation, method of drawing to a conclusion); definitions of the event; off-the-record content; use of language; use of narrative; interviewee’s questions (articulated or implicit). The purpose of such headings was to assist the interpreter to listen for the meaning behind the spoken words by making apparent the phenomena of the interview event and by creating some distance between the researcher and those phenomena. The headings served as reminders of the range of things such as the use of figurative language, silences, hesitations and body language, which can provide clues with which to interrogate the text. The intention of the tabulation of categories of phenomena was not to record observations under every heading, but to enable the significance of individual phenomena to be considered in context:

Interviewing encompasses more than listening, asking questions and being socially responsive. Often it is important to judge the significance of what is said by non-verbal cues such as gestures, the tone of the voice, how people dress, how they look, how and where they sit or to infer from what is not said or what is denied what the interviewee thinks or feels. At the same time acceptance of non-verbal cues may be misleading. Their significance has to be judged in relation to all the data obtained (Simons, 1982, 120-121, emphasis added).

This method of interpretation is holistic in that each part of the interview text is considered in relation to the whole, and an attempt is made to find a unifying theme which expresses that whole. The interview is regarded as a fabric of integrated webs of meaning. Paget’s (1983) interpretive method is propelled by similar concerns for preserving the integrity of the fabric:
The task of a science of subjective experience is preserving the essential features of the subject matter in context. This means first preserving speech as dialogue and discourse. Second, it means continuously caring about the meaning of what is said and expressed. An answer is not an entity - a thing. An answer is a spoken response. Its meaning is not constituted in advance but in its course, and, in its course, it projects specific, contextually grounded and interactional contents (Paget, 1983, 87-88).

It was mentioned above that one of the purposes of the holistic interpretation is to distil essential characteristics or messages, something like Husserl's intuition of essences. The examination of the event of the interview in this way is a search for characteristic patterns which can act as keys to the understanding of individuals and groups. This endeavour is based on an assumption that characteristic patterns are encoded in everyday behaviour, and that such patterns are immanent, if not explicit, in a singular event such as an interview. This assumption is consistent with the phenomenology of Schutz who maintained that:

At any given moment in life, the individual brings to the situation the 'sedimentation of all his previous subjective experiences'... a kind of 'stockpiling' of typifications that have been amassed since childhood to serve as 'recipes' for working out various social situations (Campbell, 1988, 65).

The concept of immanent patterns may also be illustrated by reference to the structuralist concept of the relationship between the absent totality of 'langue' and the expression of 'parole':

The relationship then of parole to langue is one of presence to absence... The existence of langue is implied in every speech or writing act, in presences, as the words are heard or seen; but it is understood in absences, through the rules of language which are never fully made manifest (Gibson, 1984, 17. original emphasis).

The thesis argued here is that deep levels of understanding can be reached without prolonged contact with a research participant if interviews are interpreted by means of such an intensive, hermeneutic method.

4.2.3.4 Ethical considerations

Because it is based on a theory of inter-relatedness rather than an ideal of objectivity, hermeneutic method restores the personal to research relationships. However, such
relationships are complicated by ethical problems because hermeneutic interpretation involves the revelation of hidden meanings. Meaning becomes problematic once one is aware of the possible presence of deliberate deception, misunderstanding, ambiguity and self-deception (Douglas, 1985; MacDonald and Sanger, 1982; Tripp, 1983). Participants may not be candid, or they may convey messages of which they are not consciously aware. The search for meaning therefore requires the assumption of a critical attitude towards the data. The method described above involves actively searching for evidence of masking and camoflage, and being alert for instances of ambiguity, incongruity and contradiction. As intimated earlier, the use of such methods raises ethical issues concerning the invasion of privacy, confidentiality and the ownership of meaning. The researcher must attempt to reach a level of interpretation which satisfies the complexities of the data without doing violence to the relationship with participants.

Ricoeur's distinction between the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith offers a guide to this dilemma:

According to one view of this conflict of interpretations, hermeneutics is construed as the restoration of a meaning addressed to the interpreter in the form of a message. This type of hermeneutics is animated by faith, by a willingness to listen, and is characterised by respect for the object as a revelation of the sacred. However, according to another view, hermeneutics is regarded as the demystification of a meaning presented to the interpreter in the form of a disguise. This type of hermeneutics is animated by suspicion, by a scepticism towards the given, and it is characterised by a rejection of that respect for the object granted by the hermeneutics of faith. In the opinion of Ricoeur, it is the latter type of hermeneutics that is practised by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud (Thompson, 1981, 46).

Defining hermeneutics as the restoration of meaning is not to deny the fact that perception is filtered by subjectivity (Gadamer, 1976). Rather, it emphasises the researcher's responsibility for self-knowledge (Reinharz, 1979, 356; Stanley and Wisc, 1983b, 162). Only through the hermeneutic insight that all understanding is essentially self-understanding can the hermeneutics of faith be achieved. In this way the separateness of individuality is subsumed by incorporation into ever-widening horizons of meaning.

In this chapter the research methodology has been presented as an example of hermeneutic principles in practice rather than as a set of clearly defined techniques. The main principles which have been observed in the context of the research project
which forms the substantive basis for this thesis are: the circularity of the processes of understanding as reflected in the design of the project; the co-creation of meaning as acknowledged in terms of the conduct of relationships with participants; and the contextuality of meaning as demonstrated in the interpretive method. Finally, ethical issues implicit in such research have been raised and addressed by adopting Ricoeur's subtle but significant distinction between the hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion. In the spirit of awareness of this distinction, and in full acknowledgment of the subjective filter of the researcher's prejudice, the data in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are presented as the restoration of meanings addressed to the researcher in the form of messages.
CHAPTER 5 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA: PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS AT TIME OF ENROLMENT

5.1 Conceptual framework

In this and the following chapters, the experience of the first year of off-campus study as reported by the seventeen people interviewed is construed as an encounter with a culturally defined institutional setting. Features of the encounter are described in terms of interactionist theories of secondary socialisation. While some explanatory description of the institutional cultures is included in order to contextualise the reported experiences and perceptions of the students, a comprehensive ethnographic account of those cultures is not intended. The meaning of the experience is conceptualised as a product of the interaction of three elements: the enrollee's personal and social context; the institutional culture; and the experience of off-campus study.

![Diagram showing the interaction between personal context, off-campus study, meaning of experience, and institutional culture.]

The term 'personal context' is used here as an umbrella term to refer to various aspects of a person's life. It includes the geographic and social contexts in which people live and work, such as class, gender and ethnicity, as well as life histories, and mental and emotional frameworks. In that it refers to the formation of habitual personal patterns and the internalisation of cultural conventions, the term 'personal context' can be regarded as having a similar meaning to the term 'habitus' used in reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bredo and Feinberg, 1979).

As discussed in Chapter 3, socialisation is defined as the process by which persons acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values which make them more or less able members of their society (Brim and Wheeler, 1976; McGuire, 1988) and does not
necessarily imply the loss of the capacity for human agency. Louis (1980, 231) distinguishes two aspects of the content of the learning process involved in socialisation. They are role-based learning, and a more general appreciation of the culture of the society or institution of which a person in becoming a member. The term ‘enculturation’ is also used where appropriate in the text which follows. Hansen (1979) uses the term ‘enculturation’ to refer to the second aspect:

In its most inclusive meaning, enculturation entails acquisition of behavioural skills, knowledge of cultural standards and symbolic codes such as language and art, culturally sanctioned motivations and perceptual habits, ideologics and attitudes (Hansen, 1979, 27).

To be successful, the new student must acquire a degree of understanding of both aspects identified by Louis. However, as Louis notes, (1980, 132), it is common for both the organisation and the newly-inducted member to fail to recognise the importance of the informal curriculum, that is, the culture of the organisation. The analysis of the interview material presented below explores, among other things, the extent to which this is true for the situations studied, and what effect the factor of being distant from the campus has on enculturation.

Considering factors which facilitate socialisation, Mortimer and Simmons (1978) mention as an important consideration the degree of compatibility between the new role, other roles occupied concurrently, and ‘the individual’s personality’. While these authors confine their remarks to role-specific learning, their observation may be applied more generally to the acquisition of culture. In the following sections, the participants are first profiled according to the degree of congruency between their personal contexts, and the sphere of experience into which they moved in 1988. This congruency is conceptualised as ‘cultural fit’. Their experiences after enrolment are then presented as stages in the process of socialisation.

5.1.1 Stages in the process of socialisation

The process of secondary socialisation occurs repeatedly as people encounter new social settings and undergo developmental stages (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). There is considerable documentation of such processes, especially in the literature of organisational theory. One approach is to identify stages in the process which can be generalised to various settings (Becker, 1964; Brim and Wheeler, 1976; Louis, 1980; McGuire, 1988; Merton, 1957). The figure below, adapted from McGuire (1988), represents socialisation as a cyclic pattern of change and development.
As the term anticipatory socialisation suggests, the first phase refers to events which happen prior to entry. Expectations formed in this phase are tested during entry and encounter, when the newcomer typically experiences change, contrast and surprise, and attempts to make sense of the new in terms of established frames of reference. This is followed by a period of adaptation or situational adjustment. The transition from outsider to insider may occur in this period or the following metamorphosis, accompanied by a process of disengagement or relinquishing of previous activities and roles. Withdrawal, or disengagement from the new setting, can happen at any of these stages, but is more likely to occur in the early stages of the process. The counterpart of disengagement is commitment, which is a necessary concomitant to full socialisation.

Socialisation can be regarded from the three perspectives, that of the organisation, the group or the individual, but it must be recognised that all three contribute to the process (Mortimer and Simmons, 1978). The term ‘induction’ is used here to describe the roles of the institution and the group in the early stages of the process. It is a feature of distance education that compared with other institutions such as the army, or even with other forms of education, the role of the group or consort in this respect is much reduced, often minimal.

5.1.2 Method of reporting

The method of reporting the data includes extensive use of direct quotations from the recorded interviews. The interview from which each quotation is extracted is identified in brackets by the date on which it occurred and its place in the sequence of interviews conducted with that person, for example: (Interview 1, 26.1.88). The speakers are identified by initials for the researcher and first name for the students.

Editing of the original transcripts has been minimised. Deletions are indicated as follows: ... Many extracts are lengthy and cover various topics additional to the one which they are selected to illustrate. This inclusive style of reporting is used both to
preserve the integrity and contextuality of the conversations, and to demonstrate the processes of symbolic interaction at work, since the students’ accounts are rich in examples of the processes of interpretation, meaning construction and negotiation. Such a mode of reporting establishes a more direct dialogue between the reader and the interview material, thus inviting the reader to create his or her own hermeneutic, and opening the statements to multiple interpretations.

5.2 Profile of participants at time of enrolment

5.2.1 Introductory table and remarks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingrid Andersen</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>BA (Humanities)</td>
<td>DU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty Squire</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>BA (Social SC.)</td>
<td>GIAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaye Rowc</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>BA (Social SC.)</td>
<td>GIAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Riddell</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>BA (Humanities)</td>
<td>DU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosie Fortune</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>BA (Humanities)</td>
<td>DU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynette James</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Gr. Dip. (Ed.)</td>
<td>GIAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary O’Connor</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Gr. Dip. (Ed.)</td>
<td>GIAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy Cossak</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>BA (Humanities)</td>
<td>DU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Brooks</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>BBus.</td>
<td>GIAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick Riley</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>BBus.</td>
<td>GIAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave Thomas</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Paramedical</td>
<td>Assoc. Dip. (Admin)</td>
<td>GIAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Henderson</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Gr. Dip. (Ed.)</td>
<td>GIAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Gurr</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Gr. Dip. (Ed.Admin)</td>
<td>DU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter McGuire</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Gr. Dip. (Ed.)</td>
<td>GIAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Davis</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Gr. Dip. (Ed.Admin)</td>
<td>DU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew Cox</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>BA (Humanities)</td>
<td>DU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Reynolds</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>BA (Social Sc.)</td>
<td>DU</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 introduces the seventeen participants individually by pseudonym, and gives basic information: age, sex and occupation as well as the course and institution in which they enrolled in 1988. While the tabular form of presentation serves useful, even necessary functions in terms of introducing the participants and providing a reference point for the following presentation of interview material, it is included with
reservations. At the risk of labouring the point, those reservations are expressed here as critical reflections on methodology. Not only does the tabular form grossly oversimplify the picture, but use of the category ‘occupation’, which is orthodox social science practice, raises the gender issues which Waring (1988) explores in her deconstruction of national and international economics: *Counting for Nothing*.

Language reflects the conceptual problems raised when such categorisation is treated as problematic. It has proved difficult to categorise the participants by occupation without diminishing the status of those women who are not in paid employment. Terms such as ‘housewife’, or ‘home duties’ tend to connote the low status work of domestic chores rather than the highly skilled aspects of the work. The term ‘family’ is hardly a satisfactory alternative. Its use with reference to women exclusively obscures the fact that most of the men in the sample were parents and performed associated duties, but the value of women’s work is diminished if the term ‘family’ is added to the occupations of men who are fathers, since the women then appear to be doing less.

The interview transcripts provide evidence that the status of their work is an issue for such women. For example, Diane, whose home demonstrated perfectionist standards of housekeeping, expressed her sensitivity on the subject this way:

**Diane:** My sons have expectations of me that - you know - why am I not working?

**MG:** Is that so?

**Diane:** Yes, yes it’s very interesting. I think they think that I’m just not capable of working. Even though I had the shop, it’s years ago and I think they’ve sort of forgotten that, or - anyway, they’re thinking major stupidity at this stage. Something is wrong with mother. It’s quite interesting, the pressure that I feel that I need to go to work. I mean apart from the fact that I need to go to work for myself, and the money would be handy, and everything else, there is pressure on me, you know, ‘Why aren’t you doing something?’ I mean every time you fill out a form these days, it’s ‘Where do you work?’ It doesn’t seem to be acceptable to say, ‘Well, excuse me, I raise a family.’(Interview 1, 21.2.88)

Cathy talked about the ways in which women accept and internalise the devaluing of their work and worth:

**Cathy:** I even heard myself actually saying to someone the other day, and I pulled myself up short, I told them I was going to university, and they said, ‘What are you doing?’ and I said, ‘Just a BA’. I thought afterwards - I gave myself a talking to and I thought, ‘Just a BA! Wait a minute!’ ‘Cause
my mother's always ticking me off for saying, 'Just a housewife'. She says, 'Not just a housewife, you are a housewife'.

MG: Yes.
Cathy: But women do that to themselves all the time. (Interview 1,11,2,88)

Categorising the participants by occupation tends to obscure the fact that adulthood entails the performance of multiple roles. All the participants, including those who were single, had commitments to family and community in addition to their career and continuing education. All except Kaye, Mary and Andrew were, or had been married, and had children. Ingrid and Alice also helped to care for grandchildren. Betty combined household and family work with a nursing career, while Diane entered part-time work in second semester 1988. Brian and Mary each ran a small business as a sideline to teaching, and Brian was also active in church affairs. Mark and Peter were married to women who pursued independent careers, and both were assuming a considerable share of the work of household management and childcare at the time they enrolled. Alice was a widow who had worked as a kindergarten assistant as well as caring for her family. The word 'retired' was considered inappropriate to describe her occupation because it would tend to obscure her active engagement in family and community affairs.

5.2.2 Significance of basic social distinctions

Successful socialisation occurs when influential factors act together to reinforce each other (Herrmann, 1988). The degree of congruence between the new students' established contexts and the institutional culture constitutes one such factor which is itself a combination of influences. In the following sections the significance of certain basic social distinctions in terms of cultural fit or dissonance is considered.

5.2.2.1 Physical distance

Distance in kilometres is only one of many possible measures or understandings of distance (Evans, 1989), but it is a useful initial basis of comparison. By Australian standards, none of these off-campus students could be described as geographically remote from their campus (see map, Appendix A). The most distant were three of the Institute students, two of whom lived in Geelong, and the other in Ballarat, and one of the Deakin students who lived in Sale. In each of these cases the distance between home and campus was approximately two hundred and fifty kilometres. At the other extreme, two of the Deakin students lived in Geelong, within five kilometres of the university campus.
5.2.2.2 Class and ethnicity

It is not intended to categorise the participants in terms of a concept of social class, nor was information of the range and specificity necessary to establish such a categorisation sought. In general terms, however, this can be described as a fairly homogeneous sample of people ranging from middle to upper class. This estimation is based on information given in the interviews about occupation and parental family background as well as observations of current life-styles and material circumstances, which appeared to range from modest to very affluent. In terms of ethnicity, all are of either Anglo Saxon or other European origin, and all but three were born in Australia. Two were born in the UK, and the other in New Zealand. Broadly speaking then, nobody in this group experienced extreme distance from the culture of higher education by virtue of class or ethnicity.

While detailed information on parental families was not sought, sufficient information was volunteered to indicate that in a number of cases the pursuit of higher education was associated with an upward social movement over two generations. Several people described the family context in which they grew up as one in which educational opportunities were limited or unavailable. However, while restricted material circumstances is a common element in these parental families, attitudes to education varied. Cathy and Brian both grew up in the industrial towns of the Latrobe Valley at a time when only a small percentage of local school leavers continued into higher education. Their fathers were skilled tradespeople who ran their own small businesses. Brian’s parents encouraged him to take a scholarship to teachers’ college rather than enter a trade, but Cathy was influenced by the prevailing attitude that post-secondary education was unnecessary for girls because they were ‘only going to get married’. Her personal history reflects the pace of social change. In the decade after she left school, both her parents undertook further education, and their changed attitudes and examples created a family context which validated her return to study.

Patrick and Kaye described families which were embedded in a cultural context which was almost anti-intellectual in terms of value systems and self-identification. On the other hand, Ingrid and Alice both grew up in families in which education was highly valued although material circumstances were difficult. Ingrid’s father was a farmer who migrated from Sweden, and Alice was born in Wales. In both cases family attitudes reflected an inherited European cultural context.

The relative homogeneity of this sample with respect to class, ethnicity and distance from campus is an important contextual feature which must be taken into account in
any assessment of the data. If degree of social integration is shown to be a significant factor in the first year experience of these off-campus students, it may be even more significant for those who are more distant geographically and culturally.

5.2.2.3 Age and gender

Tabulation by sex reveals that the women students range more widely in age than the men. Age was not a factor in the selection of participants except in the case of Alice, whose advanced age of 74 years made her an especially interesting candidate for selection. (The researcher’s interest may be indicative of culturally constructed attitudes and beliefs about age and intellectual endeavour. It is a common view that advanced age is accompanied by mental as well as physical deterioration).

Enrolment statistics supplied by Deakin University and the Gippsland Institute (Appendix E) show that while the age-range of this sample is not an exact reflection of the total off-campus student populations of those institutions, it does reflect a general trend, in that after age 40, the number of male students enrolled decreases more rapidly than the number of female students. The largest proportion of the total who are male is in the bracket 31 to 40 years, whereas the largest proportion who are female is in the bracket 41 to 50 years.

The interview material reveals that the individual life histories of these students demonstrate the effects of structural changes in the broader society. This is not to deny the effect of idiosyncratic factors in shaping the decision to enrol. The greater age range of the female students can be accounted for in part by the historical progress of broad changes which have taken place in Australian society in the past two decades, and in part by differences in developmental stages in male and female life-cycle frameworks.

The relevant societal changes in recent years are those which affect attitudes and practices relating to the role of women in marriage, the formal education system and the workforce. Kaye and Mary were not married, and their career patterns conformed more closely to those of the men. For married women of Ingrid and Alice’s generation higher education was neither realistically available nor socially sanctioned until they were middle-aged. Betty and Diane, being of the next generation, were able to take advantage of the changes in their thirties and forties, while the younger women were attempting to resume their education after a relatively short interruption for marriage and child-bearing. Translated into personal terms, the timing of the decision to enrol is seen to be closely associated with the evolving pattern of family responsibilities as children matured. It was not until their children were virtually independent that Alice
and Ingrid considered pursuing their own education, but the younger women have taken up study at various stages of their lives.

Although in some cases anxiety was expressed about loss of mental capacity with increased age, it was not age *per se* which was the distancing factor, but rather the length of time between return to study and previous involvement with the formal education system. In this period the system itself had changed considerably, and the women's identification with established roles had sedimented. Although institutions may have adjusted to the phenomenon of mature age students, adult entry to tertiary institutions is by no means generally regarded as the norm. The very phrase, 'going back to study' suggests a return to a stage in the life cycle which one should have completed years before. This attitude was expressed overtly by Diane's sons, who spoke about what their mother was about to do with a kind of tolerant embarrassment.

In their discussion of dimensions of roles that can facilitate socialisation, Mortimer and Simmons (1978, 433-434) note that adults who are the first members of their social category to assume a role, or persons who are out of step with the usual sequence of roles have to experience major transitions without the benefit of socially patterned mechanisms to smooth their adjustment. Ingrid's description of her first venture into the world of higher education illustrates the fact that re-entry to formal education can be associated with a sense of being both out of place and out of step. The feeling of being out of normal context was reinforced when others in the setting were unable to interpret her role correctly. She related the story with humour: Ingrid: With our age group most of us had only a little bit of time at secondary schooling, we missed out. Then when there was an opportunity to go back I went back and did the HSC. I can remember the first night, I came home very amused. We were waiting at the Technical School at night class, and these RAAF fellows came, and people from the bank, and others, all about twenty-five to thirty. There was a policewoman and a policeman, they needed to upgrade their qualifications for promotion. Anyway we were all waiting and the tutor came along and he was a teacher from the Grammar School, he put his key in the door and everybody turned and looked at me because I was standing separately and they said, 'Oh, we thought you were the teacher.' Because I was so much older. (Interview 1, 28, 2, 88).

The three women who were in their twenties all had young children and were not in paid employment outside the home. Their decision to enrol can be seen as a way of coping with the experience of complete immersion in domesticity which the demanding task of motherhood can become, as well as preparation for the career which they hoped to pursue when their children were less dependent.
Rosie: I'd like to get my degree in the end, but I really want to do the study just to keep myself in tune or something. 'Cause it's very easy when you've got children to end up just being able to talk about nappies and feeding and all these kind of things.

MG: There's a part of you that's being neglected, I suppose.

Rosie: That's right, well I mean it's my thing. I feel I've achieved something, whereas with children it's day after day - you feel as if you've never - after eighteen years, yes, you've achieved something, but you can't look back after a few weeks and think 'I achieved that'. Whereas if you've written a good essay and got a good mark, it's such a good feeling.

(Interview 1, 10.2.88).

Enrolment at such a stage of life is problematic, however. Lynette and Rosie gave birth to their second and third child respectively after enrolment, and both found it impossible to continue their study.

All of the men except the two medical practitioners, Matthew and John, were pursuing an additional qualification in order to enhance their career prospects. The decision to enrol can be seen in terms of a life-cycle which is more straightforward than that of women who marry and/or have children. Middle-class men and unmarried women typically pursue their careers in a more consecutive linear fashion than married women. For the men, transition from school or higher education into a chosen occupation is followed or accompanied by a period which typically includes marriage and parenthood. Subsequent enrolment for further study in the thirties represents a stage in the career when ambition and the responsibility of providing for a family combine to create pressure for greater achievement. The life-histories of all the married men in this study conform quite closely to such a pattern, which accounts for the uniformity in their ages, although John and Matthew are somewhat exceptional in that they were studying more for personal enrichment than for professional advancement.

Such differences in life cycle development are predicated on the traditional division of labour in families, whereby the respective primary responsibilities of men and women are financial provision and the care of children. In this small sample of seventeen people, significant renegotiation of this traditional pattern was taking place in two of the marital partnerships. Mark and his wife Robyn decided to give priority to her medical career. At the time when he was first interviewed in 1988 they both worked full-time and employed a nanny to care for their two small children, but Mark assumed the main responsibility for household management and after-hours care of the children. Peter and his wife Janine were both teachers, and both continued their education by part-time study after their marriage. At the time of Peter's participation in this research,
Janine's career was interrupted for the birth of their second child. Peter assumed an increasing share of domestic tasks and childcare, and his study had to be deferred.

5.2.2.4 Educational background and gender

Marked gender-specific differences are revealed by examination of the participants' previous educational experience. The men as a group were much better qualified in terms of formal education than the women. Six of the eight men but only two of the nine women, Mary and Lynette, already held tertiary qualifications. Dave and Patrick, the men who were least qualified, both left school without completing their Higher School Certificate (HSC). Dave had since completed some vocational training entailing formal study, and Patrick had previously undertaken, but not completed, courses with a TAFE college, and with the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Matthew and John both held specialist qualifications in medicine, while Mark had a doctorate in Botany. Of the three male teachers Andrew had a Bachelor's degree in Science and a Graduate Diploma in Education, Peter had a Bachelor of Education in addition to his first teaching qualification, and Brian was a graduate from a Teachers' College. Cathy, Betty and Rosie completed their secondary schooling at the 'normal' time with tertiary entrance or its equivalent, and Betty and Rosie held nursing qualifications, but the rest of the women gained entry to higher education either as mature-age special entrants or on the basis of an HSC gained as a mature-age student.

5.2.3 Other significant factors

5.2.3.1 Role compatibility and reinforcement

Several of the students could be described as primarily vocationally oriented to the courses they undertook in 1988 (Morgan Taylor and Gibbs, 1982; Taylor, Morgan and Gibbs, 1981). Their choice of course was closely associated with upward mobility in the profession in which they were already engaged. This group includes all of the teachers, Brian, Peter, Andrew and Mary, who were each seeking to enhance their career prospects in the education system by gaining further qualifications either in administration or in specialist areas. Dave was an ambulance officer, and his enrolment in the GIAE Associate Diploma in Administration was directly related to his ambitions for advancement in the service, while Patrick, who worked in an administrative capacity in a welfare organisation was also working towards vocational goals.

For all these people there was a high degree of compatibility between the new activity of off-campus study and their already existing occupational roles. Their occupational
arena provided more than the career framework and goal-setting apparatus which gave structural support to the activity of further study. Work-based friendship networks supplied people with relevant experience who helped to induct the novice into the new setting and gave on-going assistance in interpreting and validating the new meaning framework. Put colloquially, those whose enrolment was closely associated with existing professional socialisation already had 'a lot going for them':

Dave: ... a couple of other ambulance people have completed the course. A lot have started it and dropped out, but I know of at least two or three that have completed the course - and so, by chatting to them - I always had it in mind that I'd do a similar course, ah, well mainly because one of my close friends has done the course, and found it stimulating, though tiring - 'cause the way they run it is with a series of assignments and weekend schools, tutorials, um, every five or six weeks - driving down to Churchill... The people I've spoken to have said that the weekend schools and the tutorials you go to are probably the thing that helps you get through the course. The fellers who've dropped out are the ones who didn't bother going and then struggled their way through. (Interview 1, 31.1.88).

For most of the married men, the roles of student, father and provider were mutually reinforcing. Both Patrick and Dave, for example, enjoyed considerable support from their wives Karen and Judy, who treated the study as a family enterprise, providing emotional support and help with typing up assignments while accepting an increased share of the domestic tasks and the loss of their husband's company and help in the evenings and at weekends. The reinforcing effect of male role stereotypes and continuing formal education was less apparent in relationships in which traditional patterns were being seriously challenged, or if the study was less vocationally oriented.

Congruence between established patterns and the new activity was probably greatest in John's life. He was a specialist in the field of occupational health who enrolled with Deakin University in order to make himself more conversant with the discipline of anthropology which could provide a relevant meaning framework for some of his professional interests. His understanding of university cultures was sophisticated and his approach to the course confident. The only aspect of the experience which constituted a departure from accustomed activities was its off-campus mode of delivery.

Increased participation by married women in the paid workforce makes available to them professional roles which reinforce the role of student. Betty, who combined a
career in nursing with marriage and motherhood, began to experience pressure to engage in further education in order to maintain her professional credibility.

5.2.3.2 Role conflict, reality maintenance and identity

The greatest potential for role conflict was evident in the accounts of the women who were married and/or had children. As well as interrupting any career a woman may have established, the experience of childbirth and caring for young children can itself constitute almost a re-socialisation after which other occupational roles have to be re-established or created anew. For Rosie and Lynette, both in their twenties, enrolment in 1988 was an attempt to maintain an established reality. With the ultimate goal of becoming a teacher, Lynette studied part-time both before and after her marriage, completing an Arts degree in 1987. However, she found it impossible to maintain her study after the birth of her second child in first semester, 1988.

Aspects of the role of wife, such as the priority given to husbands' mobility, create difficulties for some women both in moving into new roles, and in maintaining previously established realities (finite provinces of meaning, in interactionist terms). Rosie experienced a major disruption when she accompanied her husband from England to Melbourne in 1987. She had previously enjoyed studying with the UK Open University. Enrolment with Deakin University represented a link to the reality of her previous context as well as a step towards long-term career goals. Although she had successfully combined study with motherhood in the past, the addition of a third child early in first semester 1988 proved too much, and she reluctantly withdrew. A contributing factor was an influx of friends visiting from the UK who, as house guests, took it for granted that the role of wife included that of hostess.

Cathy and Diane reported that the possibility that their husband would be transferred made goal-setting problematic:

Diane: Bob could be moved at any minute, but on the other hand we could be here for ever. So in fact that's one reason why I've delayed doing anything about my education 'cause I'm always thinking, 'We'll probaby get moved this year so there's not much point in doing anything.' (Interview 1, 21.2.88).

Conflict between the new role of student and the established role of wife and mother was especially strong for the older women and those in rural communities. Ingrid's stories about the women she met when she was studying for her HSC, and subsequently as an off-campus student of Gippsland Institute illustrate this. (Ingrid withdrew
from the GIAE course after several years, but resumed study with Deakin University in 1988). Entry into the context of higher education gave her a valuable opportunity to find others with whom she had much in common.

Ingrid: My husband can't understand why I'm going on. He keeps saying, 'Oh you're too old and it will be of no possible use to you', and all this type of thing. But it's something I feel I want to do, I'd like to go on and complete it.

MG: One of the other people I interviewed talked about the attitudes of men in her social circle. They couldn't understand why a woman would study something unless it would get her a better job. That was the only reason that made sense to them.

Ingrid: Yes, that's what I've encountered a lot too. In fact, two of the ladies - the one I told you about who breeds goats, - her husband's as interested as she is in the goat breeding, but she told me - we used to come home together, and she told me - she said, 'I have to turn off now when I go home'. She said, 'It's so sad, I just can't talk about anything that's going on down there at Churchill'. And the other one was a fully trained nursing sister and she worked at the blood bank and she was about my age with a grown up family and she said she doesn't say anything at home, she just goes about her study very quietly because her husband doesn't exactly get annoyed, but it bothers him a bit to see her studying and going off. Although he didn't mind in the least what she did at the hospital.

MG: So both these people had to keep their studies a very separate part of their lives?

Ingrid: Yes, yes.

MG: I think that's very interesting.

Ingrid: I found that with most of the women.

MG: Did you?

Ingrid: Yes, I did. In fact when I did my HSC I met a woman who told me that she hid her HSC books, and she studied behind her husband's back. He never knew anything about it. She hid them in a trunk under the bed.

MG: That's amazing.

Ingrid: Yes. She was a timid quiet little woman but she'd been conditioned to the old way of life when women were just in the house and raised the children. She got very good marks, better than I did. I don't know what's happened to her since. She was a very, very clever person, but very, very timorous. And the very first day at Churchill, it was about five years ago, there was this woman, she would have been about thirty-five, sitting directly behind me in the very first lecture I attended. She was whispering
to another woman who was sitting beside her, she said, 'I don't know what's going to happen, or how long I'm going to be able to continue this, but my husband said not a cent of his money is going on this'. She was working part-time as a nurse, two nights a week at a little hospital, and she said, 'I have to pay for everything out of my own pocket and it will only last as long as I am able to work.' Very few of the women I encountered had the support of their husbands.

MG: Is that so?

Ingrid: One lady I knew, they had a big sheep property and she said while he was out busy with the sheep, she'd slip quietly off somewhere and do her reading. Another one did it in the car. Every time I used to 'phone this particular person - she lived on a farm - she was doing the same unit as I was - she'd come to the 'phone, and I could hear the puffed voice, and I'd say, 'Did I catch you in the garden? And she'd say, 'No, I was out in the garage sitting in the back of the car studying.' That's how she had to do it. (Interview 1, 28.2.88)

Some people are able to maintain a certain reality and sense of self in virtual isolation. Alice entered higher education at an advanced age after the death of her husband having nourished her intellect for many years in a social context which offered little legitimation:

MG: Can you tell me where your interest in classical civilization and literature came from?

Alice: I don't really know, it's always been there.

MG: Has it?

Alice: As long as I can remember, but, um, I have so many books that, um, people are surprised that I have got, it must have been latent, you know, interest. I like to find out about things. It's always been in my mind but, um, I always had a busy life where I've had to work and - all I could do was read.

MG: So in fact, all those years, when you were bringing up the children, when you were working, you actually self-educated yourself?

Alice: Well I was reading all the time, buying books that interested me. ......

MG: ... So you had all that going on in your head, and going about normal domestic life, working life, family life and the community around you - was there anyone to share those interests with, all those years?

Alice: Not really, except my children. As they grew up I talked to them and always read a lot, you see, and from the time they were little I read to them, and I - we used to read, from the very beginning I just took them
through Alice in Wonderland and Peter Pan and those sort of things ... we
used to read them together, ... and then as they got older and started to
read for themselves, um, I used to read their books, so that I could talk to
them about whatever they were reading from school, and then I started
telling them what I was reading, and they could talk about those things,
they were interested, but I can’t think of anybody outside. My husband
wasn’t interested... his interests were cricket - he was a cricket fanatic,
...no, the only people - you see there is nobody in this street that I could
talk to about what I’m doing. In fact, I would say, that I’m a secret
student. Not a secret drinker, I’m a secret student! If my neighbour across
the road, or any of them come in, I pretend not to be studying, because
they think I’m mad. They think at my age I should be sitting back looking
at TV ... It’s difficult here, to keep to my study program. Because I live on
my own, and I live in a court, and they’re really very nice people, very
friendly, but they are inclined, if they see I’m at home, to come in for a
talk.

MG: Yes.

Alice: And if they see you reading, or writing, it doesn’t matter. I mean that’s not
important, that’s not work, and they sit down for a couple of hours. The
Greek lady next door came in one day, and for once in my life I was
making a cake - don’t do it very often - and she said, ‘You’re busy, I
won’t stay.’ But if I’m reading or writing, that doesn’t matter.

MG: Isn’t that interesting?

Alice: They think I’m nuts, you see. (Interview 1, 6.2.88)

By taking on the role of student Alice gained access to a culture in which something
which was formerly a private activity had meaning, and could become a shared
experience. From this context she created a social network which existed outside her
immediate suburban neighbourhood. She was able to do this more readily than the rural
women because she lived in Melbourne, which provided an environment rich in
resources and meeting places such as libraries, bookshops, concerts and public lectures.
When she enrolled with Deakin University, Alice had already created this social
context through participation in various adult education classes. The capacity for
maintaining her identity as a scholar in relative isolation, and her ability to reach
beyond her immediate environment to access contexts where this identity would be
validated and to create her own community of scholars therefrom were valuable
attributes for a person undertaking off-campus study.

The strength of Alice’s identification with scholarly pursuits can be better understood
when one recognises the links between that reality and other parts of her life-world.
Her scholastic interests refer back to the academic curriculum of the period of her youth, and to her cultural heritage. She grew up in Wales and migrated to Australia with her husband and children in 1962. The limited resources her parents could spare for her education went into music lessons rather than the university education she aspired to. Returning to the UK in 1986 to visit her dying brother who lived in Oxford, she explored on foot the famous university town, spending many hours wandering through the colleges and streets: 'Do you know I walked a pair of shoes right out!'. Oxford provided her with powerful images and cultural symbols to reinforce her sense of identification with the world which it represented.

Various degrees of compatibility or conflict between existing social context and the culture of higher education were experienced by the women who took part in the project. Cathy had a powerful role model in her mother, who became a mature-age student after her children grew up, and who had successfully completed a Bachelor of Arts as an off-campus student of the Gippsland Institute. Cathy spoke with pride of her mother’s achievement, which clearly had influenced her decision to continue her own education. However, like Alice, she reported a suburban context in which her enrolment in higher education was something of an aberration:

Cathy: Of all the women I mix with socially during the day, as far as I know, none of them are studying, or intend to study.

MG: Have you discussed what you’re doing with your women friends in your context?

Cathy: When I tell them that I’ve, you know, thought of going back and studying, they sort of say, ‘Oh, you’re so brave, oh, you must be brainy’. I find that really odd. They all think I must be nutty. And men are different again. Men always want to know what’s going to be the final reward. ‘Why are you doing this? Are you just some fruity woman that wants to do this out of interest, or is it some actual concrete goal that you’re doing this for?’ (Interview 1, 11.2.88).

Diane experienced pressure from her social context to return to study. She was not employed outside the home when she first enrolled. Her husband had an executive position with a large company, and they lived with their two teenage sons in a Gippsland town. According to Diane, it had become trendy for women to enrol at the Institute:

Diane: Oh well, half the town studies there. I mean upwardly mobile women just all study there. It’s incredible, just everybody studies there. When I came back from America - everybody - all my friends went. Incredible! It’s definitely the social thing to do as well as everything else.

MG: Oh, really?
Diane: Oh, definitely. Quite extraordinary. We were talking about this last night at this party. It's just so different from when my mother was - my mother's only nineteen years older than I am, so it's not a big age difference, and she was never expected to go and study or work, or anything. (Interview 1, 21.2.88).

It may be that Diane's perception of the external pressure was exaggerated by the sense of inadequacy she experienced as she contemplated return to study. Some of the anxiety which she and Betty expressed in the first interview can be interpreted as the result of tension between conflicting social pressures. On the one hand the traditional construction of gender incorporates the beliefs that women are intellectually inferior to men and unsuited by nature and/or disposition to higher education. Internalisation of such cultural constructs has created for women like Betty and Diane a self-perception in which doubts abound as to their ability to succeed in this arena of endeavour. On the other hand, changes in women's roles have created new expectations of women such as educational 'success'. To meet these expectations women have to challenge their own internalised belief systems, as well as any structural obstacles they may encounter. It is not surprising that they approach higher education with conflicting feelings.

Other participants experienced different kinds of conflict between the new experience initiated by enrolment and their established life-worlds. Both Matthew and Kaye had constructed professional roles with high public profiles by which they felt somewhat constrained. In one sense their decision to take up study can be seen as an attempt to create an alternative, private reality which offered relief from the public persona. For different reasons, each experienced a degree of strain between the two roles.

Kaye found it very hard to identify with the role of student, describing herself as 'a physical person rather than an academic'. This perception of self can be traced to a family context in which intellectual pursuits were regarded as alien. She left high school without matriculating and built a successful career in sport. The social context of her work reinforced the self concept established by the family. Enrolment at the Gippsland Institute at the age of forty-two was part of a self initiated challenge to her concept of self. Although she realised that, 'I have sold myself short' (in terms of estimating intelligence), this was nevertheless a courageous undertaking, characterised by periods of stress and ambivalence. One aspect of her life which provided reinforcement was a close relationship with a female friend who had established competence in the arena of higher education.

Matthew was a high achiever with a well established specialist medical practice, beautiful home, attractive wife and two healthy, intelligent children, a boy and a girl.
His life conformed in a number of respects to a stereotypical male pattern. Brought up to succeed in a competitive education system, he received an education which he described as very technical, and graduated into a profession which was increasingly technified. He had learned to strive for success in a strenuous, strategic and competitive way which he said had become a characteristic orientation towards life in general. He enjoyed the rewards of material affluence and social status, but at a cost. Some of his abilities had been left relatively under-developed and his life deprived of important dimensions of meaning and understanding. In studying the humanities he was developing hitherto hidden aspects of himself;

Matthew: This is an exercise for me, and it’s something that I haven’t had the luxury of contemplating until just recently. Everything has been so geared up to establishing a competent professional identity, which is, um, I mean, what’s the word - a nice cardboard image that you can sort of prop out and say, ‘This is me’, but behind all that there’s a whole lot that’s different. (Interview 1, 1.2.88)

5.3 Cultural fit or dissonance? - Summary

The foregoing analysis of the participants’ backgrounds reveals that by virtue of the reinforcing effects of educational and family background and professional socialisation, many were well positioned to enter or re-enter the world of higher education, and some could be described as sophisticates in this respect.

This examination of the participants’ established personal contexts has revealed that in this sample of students, gender constituted the strongest single source of cultural distance. Various factors in the social construction of some of the women’s lives had combined to mitigate against their inclusion in the culture of higher education, and they had to confront internalised cultural norms and attitudes which contributed to psychological distance. The experience of the single women in the group helps to clarify the issue somewhat. It would appear that it is not so much the fact of being female per se, but rather gender differences in the social construction of the role of parenthood which creates the cultural barrier between women and higher education.

Cultural continuity can be said to be operative in the cases of Ingrid, Rosie and Peter who had previous experience of off-campus study at tertiary level. Ingrid was a particularly valuable informant in this respect because she reflected during the interviews on her experience as a novice and compared that with her situation as a more experienced off-campus student. The teachers, Mary, Brian, Peter and Andrew, were already embedded in the world of the formal education system, while Matthew,
John and Mark, who had all gone directly from secondary school into professional education at one of the major metropolitan universities, and then completed graduate studies in their chosen profession, were also clearly sophisticated entrants. A variation on the theme of cultural continuity was presented by the two young mothers, Rosie and Lynette, who were fairly recently immersed in the suburban world of domesticity and babies. Their enrolment can be seen as an attempt to introduce a familiar ‘outside’ culture into the new context of domesticity.

5.4 Motivations and meanings

Some indications of motivations are implicit in the personal profiles given above. However, it is not intended to establish categories of motivation per se. Rather, the focus of the research is on the ways in which the decision to return to study was meaningful to the people interviewed. Motivation is considered to be an outcome of meaningfulness, a resultant of the recursive relationship between the individual and society. Social forces act to motivate individuals through the process of internalisation, but personal motivations are meaningful in terms of both individual meaning frameworks and the social matrix in which those individuals take action.

The discussion of personal profiles above explores the ways in which return to study in adult life is meaningful in cultural terms. For some of the people interviewed, aspects of the personal context constituted barriers to further education. To the extent that these factors were internalised, they became psychological barriers. In these terms the decision to enrol can be seen as a courageous act, involving the confrontation of fears and inhibitions and the willingness to change. The way some of the students went about this action suggests that they were already engaged in that kind of learning and personal growth characterised by Mezirow (1977; 1981; 1985) as ‘perspective transformation’. The transformation of perspectives involves becoming critically aware of the ideologies which have contributed to one’s existential situation, and may result in dramatic change. Mezirow conceives of a meaning perspective as a culturally produced personal paradigm:

...a structure of cultural and psychological assumptions within which our past experience assimilates and transforms new experience (Mezirow, 1985, 21).

Dave’s enrolment with the Gippsland Institute in 1988 necessitated that he challenge a belief system which was constructed from his internalised interpretation of earlier experiences in the education system. Some of the assumptions which formed part of his meaning framework acted as a negative influence offsetting the positive reinforcement
provided by his employment and family contexts and creating tension in his approach to study. Matthew's and Kaye's approaches to the experience of higher education which they undertook in 1988 have been discussed above in terms of role conflict. It became increasingly apparent during the course of the interviews with Matthew that the decision taken in his mid-thirties to study the humanities after years of achievement in a technicist medical education represented a paradigm shift.

As a single woman the configuration of social influences in Kaye's life history is somewhat different from both the men and the married women. Like Patrick and Dave, she left school early without matriculating, but this fact did not cast the same kind of shadow or produce the same kind of guilt, because the question of fitness for the role of provider was not at stake. She related her career up to 1988 with some pride, as the story of an independent person who succeeded through enterprise and ability in spite of the lack of formal qualifications. Neither did she express the kind of tension exhibited by some of the other women which seems to be associated with conflict between the roles of mother and student. Exploration of this issue over the course of four interviews revealed that Kaye's sense of distance was more individualistic, associated with a questioning of identity.

Both Matthew and Kaye were able to reflect critically on assumptions about their identity and other aspects of their meaning frameworks, and this enabled them to challenge some of those assumptions. In that it represented a translation of this challenge into action, enrolment in 1988 was a quickening of a process of change which had begun some time previously. In fact, Kaye mentioned that she had been considering taking this step for several years, and Matthew spoke of a period of self-reflection which had occurred the previous year when he was immobilised for a time by a back injury.

These people were essentially self-directed learners (Brookfield, 1985; Mezirow, 1985) with self-initiated learning agendas which had their own curricula, of which undertaking formal study was a part. This is not to say that they were necessarily fully aware of either the curriculum or the agenda at the level of the discursive consciousness. The progressive raising of the consciousness of inner processes is part of the transformative process. The interaction between self-initiated curricula and those of the educational institutions, and the extent to which the students continued to direct the process is examined in Chapter 7.
CHAPTER 6 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA: ANTICIPATION AND ENCOUNTER

6.1. The institutional role in induction

6.1.1 Culture-specific calendar and terminology

The entry and subsequent experience of new students is formally structured by educational institutions in accordance with the academic calendar. Similarities and differences between individual institutional calendars reflect the fact that while each institution has a distinctive culture, both are embedded in a larger culture of higher education. The Deakin University calendar for 1988 was printed in its Programs Handbook, and the Gippsland Institute calendar appeared in its Guide to External Studies. The calendar printed in the Deakin Handbook, which addressed the information needs of both on- and off-campus students, included dates relevant to the on-campus lecture program. The emphasis given to weekend schools by the Institute was indicated by the fact that the dates of the schools were the first things listed under the heading ‘Important Dates for 1988’ on the inside front cover of the Guide to External Studies. The Deakin academic year extended from 7 March to 25 November, while the Institute year began on 27 February with the first weekend school on campus, and ended on 2 December. In both cases the year was divided into two semesters, each of which culminated in an examination period. Within each semester, time was structured by the assessment program, which typically included for each unit of study, one or two cycles of the submission and marking of written assignments and an examination at the end of semester. The terminology used for a unit of study differed; the Deakin handbook referred to ‘course’, while the Institute’s guide used the term ‘unit’.

Through the organisation of time created by the academic calendar, the institutional culture impinges on off-campus students’ everyday life-worlds. Whatever else might be happening in their established contexts, they must, in order to be successful students, comply to some extent with the imperatives of the academic calendar. The accommodation to the academic calendar in tandem with other cycles of events in their professional and domestic lives constitutes one of the main areas of negotiation between their established lives and the institutional culture. As a consequence, time management becomes a major consideration.

It is difficult to discuss the academic calendar without recourse to specialist terminology. The encounter with administrative jargon is likely to constitute the
intending student's first experience of the language by which the institutional culture is
encoded and expressed. Exposure to this language is an important part of the content of
socialisation. This fact is implicitly recognised in Deakin University's Guide to
Off-campus Studies 1988 in which the contents page is followed by a mini-dictionary
of key terms, a thoughtful attempt to make the culture explicit.

6.1.2 Induction rituals

Two aspects of institutional roles in the induction process are very apparent. The first
is the highly bureaucratised character of the induction process, including the
completion of forms, assembly of documentary evidence and compliance with a series
of deadline dates. The second is the effort on the part of the organisations to provide
appropriate expectations and induction experiences. This effort was evident in the
provision of orientation exercises in both face-to-face and printed format.

At the time this study was undertaken, both the University and the Institute began the
process of recruitment and enrolment of off-campus students in the September
preceding the commencement of the academic year. Intending students had first to
submit their credentials and apply for a place by the end of October. They could expect
to be notified as to whether their application was successful early in December. The
next step which was the completion of an enrolment form to be lodged before a
specified date in January. Information to guide the intending students through this
process was available in printed materials such as handbooks and brochures which
formed part of the institution's administrative response to enquiries from intending
students. The two institutions conducted this process by similar discernible stages
(Table 2). In practice, the stages were somewhat less clearly defined than the table
suggests, since a certain amount of administrative flexibility was necessary to
accommodate withdrawals, modifications to enrolment and late enrolments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>DU Date</th>
<th>GIAE Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Closing dates)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Offer of place</td>
<td>mid Sept. - mid Nov.</td>
<td>early Dec.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Orientation days</td>
<td>Nov.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Main campus &amp; Melbourne)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Completion of</td>
<td>late Nov.</td>
<td>late Jan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enrolment process</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>
6 Dispatch of preliminary information
mid Dec. late Jan.
7 Orientation days
(Main campus)
March 5-7 Feb.
8 Dispatch of course materials
late Jan. or early Feb. W/E school
late Jan. or early Feb. 27-28 Feb.
March - April early March

Differences between the two institutions in regard to the sequencing of the steps in the induction process proved to be significant in terms of the subjective experiences of their respective students. These differences reflected the relative emphasis given to the use of face-to-face learning situations and packaged learning materials in the institution's overall approach to distance education. Apart from a recruitment tour conducted by the Head of External Studies which covered most of the state, the Gippsland Institute's orientation program and tutorial support system was centralised to a significant degree. The Institute offered a weekend orientation program on the Churchill campus early in February and placed considerable emphasis on encouraging students to attend subsequent weekend schools. Study guides were distributed at the orientation day, or dispatched subsequently to those who did not attend, but the main course materials were held for distribution at the first weekend school. The social events created by this policy were occasions on which new off-campus students came together in large numbers and temporarily 'took over' the Churchill campus. It could be expected that this emphasis on face-to-face contact located on the campus would have a significant effect on the socialisation of its students.

Deakin University, on the other hand, put more emphasis on the production and early dispatch of course materials and printed orientation materials, including a *Counselling Package*. The latter was included in a 'Confirmation package' dispatched in December, which also contained booklists, book order forms, and preliminary information on the content and management of the specific courses in which students had enrolled. Orientation sessions which were much smaller in scale than the Gippsland Institute weekend were conducted in November at its Melbourne Study Centre and at the Geelong campus. An orientation event at the Geelong campus held after the beginning of the semester was an initiative not of the university administration but of an ancillary student support group known as 'Contact'. These occasions attracted smaller numbers and had a different ambience from the events held at Churchill.
Because the academic calendar was perceived to structure both the induction process and subsequent socialisation, it also structured the interview project. The first round of interviews was conducted between the 26 January and the 24 March. The new students were asked about their reactions to those aspects of the process outlined above which they had experienced by that time.

6.2 The induction process from the students' perspectives

From the accounts of the interviewees, two stages which are identified in literature about socialisation processes in adulthood (Brim and Wheeler, 1976; Louis, 1980) can be discerned: ‘anticipatory socialisation’ and ‘entry-encounter’. Although they had complied with the institutional induction, the stages of the process in the corresponding period September 1987 to March 1988 were defined less precisely in the interviewees’ subjective experiences, and corresponded only approximately to the ‘official’ time line. Whereas in the traditional system the beginning of the students’ academic year is clearly defined by their arrival on campus and various ritualised events, in distance education, the corresponding stage is signified by the receipt, through the postal system, of a series of packages and, perhaps, by a visit to the campus or some local facility for an orientation event. Another significant difference is that on-campus students experience entry to college or university as a group event, albeit a group initially composed mostly of strangers, whereas for off-campus students, encounters with others of their cohort during this period are few or non-existent. For these reasons the fact of a new beginning may be less clearly marked in the off-campus student’s consciousness, and more easily submerged by the imperatives of events in other spheres of activity such as professional or family life.

6.2.1 Anticipatory socialisation

Anticipatory socialisation is a process which begins well before the institutional induction outlined above. In Chapter 5 the concept of ‘cultural fit’ between the new student’s established personal context and the culture of higher education was explored. Factors such as previous educational history, including length of time since engagement with the formal education system, age, gender and social position were examined for their effect on cultural fit or distance. In the following sections features of anticipatory socialisation in the period between enrolment and the start of the first semester are identified. The subjective states in which the prospective students anticipated the experience are explored and aspects of their agency in the socialisation process considered.
6.2.1.1 Expectancy

The period of anticipatory socialisation is a time when people make mental projections in anticipation of their encounter with the new setting. Brim and Wheeler (1976) note that the anticipated length of stay of recruits affects both their own expectations and organisational attitudes. It is a typical feature of tertiary off-campus study that it is undertaken on a part-time basis, so that completion entails a commitment for a greater number of years than would be required to attain the same qualification by full-time study. In terms of new off-campus students’ expectations of themselves, this is a period of preparation for an endeavour which will require consistent application over a considerable period of time. Of the students interviewed, those attempting associate or graduate diplomas were anticipating an enrolment of from two to four years, while the people who were undertaking bachelor’s degrees expected that completion would require between six and ten years of sustained effort.

Several of the interviewees expressed doubts as to whether they could sustain a commitment for the required length of time. Mark, who was a sophisticated learner undertaking a graduate diploma in education in order to build increased flexibility into his career options, was unsure that the course would hold sufficient intrinsic interest for him to counterbalance the sacrifice of other preferred activities. Enrolling at the advanced age of seventy-four, Alice faced the prospect that she might not retain life and health long enough to complete her degree. This had an interesting effect on her choices: since time was precious, she was not prepared to spend it studying subjects which did not interest her, and was very self-directed and selective in her learning agenda.

John was also atypical in his expectations of the duration of the endeavour because his purpose was to study certain units in the Anthropology stream of the Deakin School of Social Sciences. While he did not rule out the possibility of completing the degree, this was not of paramount concern to him. In the event he deferred after two semesters, having achieved his goals.

In contemplating the on-coming period of their lives, the new students considered not only their motivation and capacity for commitment, but also the impact on established patterns in their personal contexts. Subsequent interviews revealed that some of them underestimated the amount of time they would need to devote to study, but others discovered that they could ‘get by’ with less application than expected. The support of families and in some cases of employers was considered to be an important factor in the decision to enrol. The duration of the period of study was one factor taken into
account in family negotiations. Dave's wife Judy was very supportive of his study, which she regarded as a family enterprise, but she was concerned that the disruption to family life which it entailed should not continue for too long. For this reason she had a vested interest in encouraging Dave's diligent application. Some of the students indicated that their children had been consulted in pre-enrolment family discussion. Cathy said that her daughters, aged two and six years, were 'Very proud of their mother going to university', but Diane was concerned about unhelpful attitudes of her sons, aged twelve and thirteen, who were not inclined to undertake extra household chores. At the end of the first interview the boys joined us at a round-table discussion about the effect of her study on the family. The eldest boy said that it was important that his mother be available at weekends, because: 'You can talk to her and tell her your problems.'

Students also have expectations of institutions. They expect that the institution's reputation and status in the community will be such as to ensure that the qualification they obtain will have appropriate currency in the employment market, and more generally as a status symbol. The people interviewed expressed a keen interest in and awareness of such matters, and were able to debate the relative merits of different institutions, usually according to perceptions prevalent in their local communities. Their expectations of the academic content of tertiary study were more difficult to ascertain. Those who had recent experience of tertiary study were able to base their expectations relatively realistically on this. Expectations are an indication of the meanings with which people invest the idea of higher education. Such meanings are intensified for people who experience themselves as excluded, for whatever reasons, from this area of achievement. A high expectation of the rigour of the academic program seems to be implicit in the low estimation of their own ability evidenced by some of the women students. The effects of such disparities became more apparent as their associations with the institutions progressed, but it is clear that they contributed to anxiety in the period leading up to the beginning of semester.

At the time of the first interview, the participants varied considerably as to the amount of mental and emotional energy with which they invested their expectations. The comment made by one of Diane's sons who said that it was 'OK' with him that his mother was going back to school, but that, 'She shouldn't make such a big deal of it' suggests that the family was feeling the impact of the emotional intensity surrounding her return to study. By contrast Andrew's approach seems almost blase. Having completed the enrolment procedures, he virtually put the business of impending off-campus study out of his thoughts, giving cursory attention to the 'Confirmation package' when it arrived in December, and allowing it to become buried other under
papers on his desk. Only our impending interview on 8 February prompted some action; he perused the materials on the previous evening. Andrew withdrew from the course at an early stage; he was virtually a non-starter. His delay in dealing with the materials from Deakin may have been associated with ambivalence about the new venture and a wish to defer the impact of its reality.

6.2.1.2 Confidence, anxiety and guilt

Considering the gender-related differences in degree of cultural fit, it is not surprising that the greatest anxiety about the new endeavour was expressed by women, and the strongest expressions of confidence were made by men. At the time of enrolment, most of the women harboured similar doubts and anxieties about their fitness for higher education:

Diane: My brain isn’t that good.
MG: What makes you think that?
Diane: I don’t know, but I do worry about my brain. Well, I haven’t gone very far with my education, obviously. My husband thinks that I’m intelligent... he’s always trying to build my confidence, and I - because I’ve never done any tertiary education, I tend to hold people who have in great esteem, and my husband keeps assuring me that there are plenty of people with engineering degrees who are far stupider than I am, but, you know, until you’ve done it, you just don’t know, do you? (Interview 1, 21.2.88).

Ingrid returned repeatedly during our conversations to the sources of her hesitant approach to higher education:

Ingrid: I would never have believed that I could have gone on and done my HSC and gone on to higher education because I didn’t think I was capable of it because of the way we were raised. Although my father was always referring to educated people, always... he had a great feeling about educated people... My mother used to say to my father, ‘Don’t worry about the girls, just think about the boys, see that they get a good education and settle down on the land.’ See that’s how she was raised. They used to say quite often when I was young, I heard many a parent say, ‘You waste your money on the girls, they’ll get married, it will only be a wasted effort’. (Interview 1, 28.2.88).

Ingrid: When I did my HSC I met the lady I told you about who has the mohair goat farm now, and she said, ‘Let’s go to the Gippsland Institute if we get enough passes.’ And I looked at her and told her she was mad. ‘I couldn’t possibly, we won’t get up there!’ She often reminds me to this day. (Interview 2, 13.5.88).
Low estimation of ability was associated in several cases with anxiety about voicing thoughts and opinions:

MG: After I’d listened to the tape of our last interview I wrote down what I thought I heard you say - not in so many words - but I thought you were saying something like, 'My ideas are not interesting or valuable.'

Betty: Yair, I know what you mean. I've got ideas, but I often think that people don't really think that my ideas are alright. This came out at a meeting the other night... something would be said and I'd sort of go to say something and I'd get half way through it and someone would come in over the top of me. And I'd think, 'Well, they're not interested in what I've got to say.' And I feel if I speak any louder, I'm shouting. Do you know what I mean?... Often I feel quite insecure in that sort of situation. I know basically, because I've proved to myself that my ideas have been right, but I don't think that other people think that they are right. Does that make sense?

MG: It fits with what I gleaned from our conversation. If you learn at college to present your ideas in a way that perhaps will be heard, if you learn to put your ideas on paper, you'll have a voice?

Betty: Yes. I hope so. One thing I want from it is that I want to have confidence that what I'm doing and saying is right. I suppose to make me feel as though I'm doing something that is right... I have never felt confident in talking in front of people... If you ask me to go and stand up in front of a group of people, it may only be five, but that's it, I just stop. Just get one sentence out and that will be it. I sort of think it might help me in that area, give me more confidence. It all goes back to secondary school, because I was made a fool of for doing it. (Interview 2, 14.5.88)

Both Betty and Diane associated their inhibitions with male authority figures. Betty was ridiculed in the presence of the school Principal and the Dean of her local church, and Diane was intimidated by her father.

Diane: My father is very overpowering. Well, especially when he was younger, he's obviously mellowed now. But very overpowering. Extremely intelligent person... a Member of Parliament - very clever, but also very self-opinionated. He won't stand for other people's opinions, especially his children. I remember I came back to him once and said, you know, I couldn't see anything all that wrong with the opposition party. He absolutely exploded, and said, 'Well, you are far too young to have an opinion.' You know, I was old enough to be paying taxes and stuff like that, but I was far too young to have an opinion of such things, and, you
know, just not even bother him with such nonsense. I was always told never to argue with my elders, and even now, if I'm at a dinner party and there's someone older than me, I can't argue with them, because it was hammered into me. 'Don't argue with our elders.' You know? 'Your opinion is worthless.' I was always given that. I was told I was very smart, I knew I was smart at school because I never had to study and I did quite well, but I also knew that my opinion wasn't worth anything and I was too immature, and I think I still am. (Interview 2, 14.5.88).

Such stories find many resonances in feminist literature, in which the silence of women, education, empowerment and finding a voice are associated and recurring themes (Bolenky et al., 1986; Graham, 1983; Smith, 1979; Spender, 1980; 1981b). In the context of such literature, the doubts and anxieties expressed by some of the women in my study can be understood as the internalisation of cultural taboos against the development and expression of the intellectual powers of women. Such taboos have been maintained by denial of the existence of intellectual ability in women, and legitimated by recourse to theories which not only attribute deficiency to women, but construe such deficiency as natural, genetically given.

Another source of anxiety about the anticipated new enterprise of study was the possibility of failure:

Cathy: I took 'Narrative' mainly because I love literature, and I think it's a good introduction for me for tertiary education. I think it's something that I should - I should not fail. I hope, um, you know, I hope not to fail. I hope that this is the least likely subject I'll fail in - one of the reasons I took it, and also because there's no exams, just assignments.

MG: I think that's very understandable, it's good to have a positive experience for the first one.

Cathy: I think so. I think if you fail first up, it's pretty disheartening, and if I fail 'Narrative' I'll probably resign and leave and commit suicide - do something really drastic. I'll be very upset if I fail 'Narrative'. (Interview 1, 11.2.88).

Later in the conversation Cathy returned to the subject of failure and compared herself to young people who progress directly from secondary school to tertiary study:

Cathy: I think the stigma of failure at this age is perhaps more poignant than at that age. The fear of failing your HSC is quite overwhelming, but I know with my friends who went on to university, if they flunked a unit, they flunked a unit, big deal, do it again. But to me, if I fail a unit, you know, I'll be (mimes cutting throat). (Interview 1, 11.2.88).
The hyperbole and colloquialisms Cathy used in speaking of her fear of failure are characteristic of her mode of presentation in the interviews which was graphic and expressive. Nevertheless, it is clear that much was at stake for her in terms of self-esteem. Subsequent interviews revealed that she was aiming for very high marks. This is indicative of a need to prove herself, rather than of high confidence. However, she would not have enrolled if she had not reached a certain level of confidence:

Cathy: I don't think I would ever have attempted off-campus studies if it hadn't been for my mother doing them, because... the part of study that I like is that class discussion and class interaction... but then talking to Mum and hearing what she was doing... I sort of thought, well maybe I could manage. I don't expect to do as well as she did, but I do think if she could do it, then I should be able to too... unless she's just a genius and I'm a ding a ling. (Interview 1, 11.2.88)

Betty, whose anxiety about whether her ideas were worthwhile, or 'right', has been mentioned above, deferred coming to terms with the new reality:

Betty: I 'spose if I think too much about it I'll start to get terrified, and think, 'I shouldn't have done this'. (Interview 1, 20.2.88)

Of all the women, Diane and Kaye were the most candid about their levels of anxiety. Diane led straight into this subject at the beginning of the first interview and when her husband joined us after the tape-recorded part of our encounter was over, she immediately told him that I had given her reassurance that she was not alone in being anxious at this stage. The level of her anxiety is apparent in the part of the interview quoted below (6.2.2.4). Kaye's dramatic description of her emotional state on Orientation Day is quoted in 6.2.3.4. Both women harboured negative beliefs about their mental ability and were looking to formal study as a way of proving to themselves and others that these beliefs were false. It is understandable that the idea of failure was not something they could tolerate.

Developing their conception of 'orientation' to study, Taylor, Morgan and Gibbs (1981) note the distinction made between 'qualification' and 'compensation' as reasons for studying in Goodyear's study of motivations of Open University students:

... students whose aim was compensation feel that they have been cheated of the educational experience due to inaccurate assessment of their ability, and they feel that they are not valued by the world in the way that they deserve... Compensation was tied up with the need for greater counselling time and need for greater contact with Open University personnel in
general because these students often had an extreme need to succeed and tended to be anxious (Taylor, Morgan and Gibbs, 1981, 5, original emphasis).

Sufficient of the elements of this 'compensation' orientation are present in the accounts of Cathy, Diane, Kaye, and Betty to endorse Goodyear's finding that previous exclusion from educational opportunity, and feelings of being undervalued are linked with extreme need to succeed, a tendency to high anxiety in the initial stages and the need for contact with institutional personnel. Sufficient has been said in this thesis to indicate that the social construction of gender helps to explain why so many of the women students exhibit aspects of this syndrome. In terms of their exclusion by the social construction of gender from educational opportunities, women and girls can indeed be described as 'cheated', though none of the women in this study carried the kind of 'chip on the shoulder' which the use of the word implies. Certainly several of the women talked about the effect of the low social status of housework on their self esteem, and the need for reassurance from both peers and institutional personnel is expressed in several of the excerpts from interviews quoted in this chapter. An appreciation of the social forces which contribute to 'compensator' behaviour in women should produce a non-judgmental understanding of such students. It should also be noted at this point that at the time of enrolment, nearly all the women interviewed underestimated their ability to succeed, and some grieved the high marks they received for their first assignments with disbelief. Fortunately anticipatory anxiety typically gave way to confidence by the end of the first semester.

At the other extreme from the anxious 'compensator', John was confident from the beginning. Equipped with a history of educational and professional achievement and a sophisticated understanding of university cultures, he was well prepared. He was putting little at stake in this exercise, since attainment of a qualification was not his main aim, and though the study was related to professional interests, his career was unlikely to be negatively affected if he did not gain credit for the courses undertaken. Indeed, he had effectively eliminated the possibility of failure by structuring the experience in this way, and any failure to attain the goals set in his own terms could be attributed to the pressures of a demanding career and family responsibilities.

In terms of socialisation theory, John's confidence can be interpreted as that of somebody who was actually already an insider. He was no stranger to university life, which he described in the manner of a habitue, with a tinge of the impatience of somebody who is being asked to elaborate on the obvious:

MG: How would you describe Deakin, do you feel it's familiar?
John: Well, as a university it's familiar to me. Clearly its layout and things are
quite different, the fact that you haven’t got dozens of people running all over the campus is strikingly different and therefore makes you wonder what sort of a university you are dealing with, compared to Melbourne where you are tripping over people. The rooms have got the same cold sterility of any university lecture room or tutorial room. The staff seem to be similar, their regimented beards and what have you...

**MG:** What do you expect of a university?

**John:** Oh well, there’s that sort of bustle and people going around the place and you know that this is an area of activity and there’s people in their late teens and twenties who are sort of the main focus of the place and what you think it’s about. And occasionally, you know, some scruffy looking bloke in a tweed jacket with the elbows out of the sleeve comes shuffling by and he’s trying to look like an academic. So, you know, that’s all sort of what you expect on the campus. (Interview 2, 10.6.88).

In spite of the evidence which the interview material appears to offer, it is not possible to conclude that the women in the study approached the new situation with more trepidation than the men. The students’ statements must be interpreted in the context of the interview situations, which were affected by gender in complex ways. It may be that the tendency for the women to be more expressive about their fears can be attributed to the commonly accepted gender stereotypes of women being more in touch with their emotions and men being inhibited by cultural taboos from acknowledging feelings of inadequacy. It is also clear that the gender of the interviewer influenced what the students were prepared to talk about. However, it can be said that to the degree that they expressed apprehension about their chances of success, the women were concerned about their intellectual ability, whereas the men were concerned about their capacity for application.

It is noteworthy that Betty associated being silent with fear of being in the wrong. While she sourced this fear to a particular event which occurred during her adolescence, it is probable that the effect of such an experience was repeatedly reinforced. Having one’s opinions discounted, and discrediting one’s ideas because they seem to be at variance with the ‘official’, that is, dominant male-constructed version of reality are common female experiences. Spender (1981b) maintains that the experience of being wrong is endemic to the state of being female.

Women receive many messages, both directly articulated and encoded in social behavioural patterns, to the effect that they are wrong. Unfortunately, even feminist writing can reinforce a woman’s sense of being wrong whatever she does:
Cathy: You're supposed to be the ideal good mother and stay at home with your children, but then if you do, other women will say, and you'll say yourself, 'Oh, she's got vegiemash for brains because she spends all her time talking baby talk.' Which really annoys me. The longer time goes on the more annoyed I become that there is no support any more for anything that women do... If you stay at home all the time and spend time with your children, you're the ideal mother in inverted commas, but then someone will say that you can't be a good mother if you spend all your time with your children because your brain rots. Then if you work part time and look after your children part time as a lot of women do, you're depriving your children of your time, and in your career you'll be in a dead end job and you won't get ahead, probably... Then if you go out to work full time and put your kids in childcare, you're maybe a successful career woman, but lots of women will have their knives out for you, and men will question you too, 'Where's your maternal instinct?' So I reckon it's pretty tough for women.

MG: Yair, that's what Dale Spender says, being female is being wrong.

Cathy: Is she a feminist writer?

MG: Mm.

Cathy: Yair, being female means being wrong. Yep. I think that's one of the things that annoys me with the feminist movement particularly. In order to rationalise their work experience out of the home, they found it necessary to denigrate the women who chose to stay in the home... So that we don't even have a solid block of women any more... To get ahead, women either have to pretend they're men, or put up with a lot of dumping on, because they're not supposed to be there, really, are they? (Interview 4, 20.11.89).

It is not surprising, then, that the subjective experience of women who are about to return to study is pervaded by feelings of inadequacy and guilt, and, indeed, this phenomenon has been noted and explored by other researchers (Kelly, 1987; Martin 1986; 1988).

To the extent that feelings of guilt were associated with return to study, there appears to be a different pattern for some of the men in my study. Patrick and Dave felt guilty about their possible failure to do what was socially expected of them as males, that is, complete their education in order to enhance their ability to perform the role of husband and father. Their identification with this role was a significant part of their motivation for returning to study. Unlike the women, they did not need to justify their decision, which was positively socially sanctioned. While a need to redeem previous
‘failure’ motivated them to return to study, their fear of repeating the previous negative pattern was anxiety-provoking. Both had withdrawn from secondary school without completing the final year, and tended, when relating their histories, to accept personal responsibility, referring helplessly to their mis-spent youth. They were reasonably confident in their academic ability, but anxious about their capacity for consistent application. Both approached study as a chore, a means to an end, and had a low sense of involvement with the Institute.

Patrick: I went to Paradc College, Bundoora, up to form four. But my mother couldn’t afford to keep me there - I had a whole tribe of brothers behind me - so I went to Thornbury High School in form five.

MG: That’s a crucial time to move from one school to another.

Patrick: Surprisingly with all the distractions that co-education sort of forced on me I did reasonably well in form five. It was just strange after all those years at boys’ school to see girls running around at school. I quite enjoyed that year, there was no trauma in the change. But the following year, year twelve, form six, three quarters of the way through the year like a silly buggar I just chucked it all in. The Principal tried to talk me out of it. He said, ‘You are going quite well, don’t be such a - don’t be so silly.’ My mother tried to talk me out of it, but I said, ‘No, I’ve just had enough.’ Which was a very foolish thing to do... I sure wish to hell I hadn’t done that, because maybe if I hadn’t done that I wouldn’t be doing this. But mind you the fact that I am doing it now is quite good because I’ve got the opportunity to make up for a rather foolish error years ago... It’s an opportunity that won’t get away because it’s not going to come by again as far as I’m concerned because if I cease or drop out or stop I know that I probably won’t do it any later on in life. It feels right that I am doing it at the moment. (Interview 2, 28.5.88).

The events of 1988 indicate that Patrick’s sense that the timing was right for him to break through the negative influence of this past experience was correct. Although he had previously made false starts in the form of enrolment and withdrawal from courses of study, on this occasion his commitment increased as the year progressed. This positive breakthrough was reflected in his employment context by a successful move to a better position.

The interviews gave Dave an opportunity to reflect on his school experience, and by the fourth interview, a different interpretation of events emerged. After hearing him talk about his promising career in the ambulance service and the parallels between his
own early childhood and that of his eldest son, an intellectually 'gifted' child, I offered an alternative interpretation of his 'failure' at high school. As a young child he was a precocious learner who was often bored at school. He had trouble in the final year of high school because he had never learned to apply himself in a disciplined way. When this experience was constructed as a failure, his intellectual ability was discounted and his love of play construed as lack of application.

Negative belief systems such as those described above, which were held by most of the women but also, in different configurations, by some of the men in the sample, constituted part of what I have called the personal context from which they approached the encounter with the culture of higher education and the experience of off-campus study. In that these belief systems were associated with previous educational experience, they can be identified as negative aspects of anticipatory socialisation, or barriers to identification with the new culture. The decision to enrol was a courageous challenge to such belief systems. Recognition of this fact produces greater understanding of the roots of the emotional intensity which frequently accompanies such a step.

6.2.2 Action during anticipatory socialisation

In the discussion above of the subjective realities of the new students, experiences from both their recent and more distant pasts are included as agents in the process of anticipatory socialisation. The following observations refer mainly to the period between application for enrolment and the beginning of first semester 1988.

Mortimer and Simmons (1978, 430) distinguish between generalisation theories of socialisation, which view the socialisation process as a rather predictable one in which the socialisee has a relatively passive role, and dynamic theories which emphasise the fluidity of the process. Symbolic interactionism is categorised as a highly dynamic conception of socialisation, in which the socialisee is an active and goal-seeking agent. As well as the self-assessment, decision-making and construction of expectations implicit in the accounts given above, activities which featured in the informants' accounts of this period are: information-gathering, interpretation of institutional cultures, confronting the unknown and waiting.

6.2.2.1 Information gathering

Intending newcomers require information about the social context they are about to encounter. Schutz (1964, 93-94) identifies the knowledge correlated to the cultural pattern of the new social context which is acquired by newcomers as a collection of trustworthy recipes which are both precepts for action and interpretive schemes. Berger and Luckmann (1966, 56) limit their definition of recipe knowledge to that which is
necessary for pragmatic competence in routine performances. For the purposes of the following account of the actions and experiences of intending off-campus students, practicalities, terminology and interpretive schemes are all included in the content of recipe knowledge.

Louis (1988, 242) notes that newcomers are typically unaware of both their need to understand context-specific interpretation schemes, and the fact that they are unfamiliar with them. The researcher's previous experience in liaison between off-campus students and a university faculty and administration led to a belief that the state of being unaware of one's ignorance of certain kinds of knowledge, and of the significance of such ignorance is an important element of the experience of off-campus students (Grace, 1989). Their relative social isolation contributes to this state, but it is symptomatic of their marginal status which is encoded in the very terminology by which they are commonly designated: off-campus and ex-temal.

With this perception, or tentative hypothesis, already formed, certain topics were raised in the first interview with the intention of eliciting the level of the students' awareness of the importance of recipe knowledge, and the extent that such knowledge was already gained. Significantly, it proved to be fairly difficult to get them to expand on these topics. The fact that they tended to lead the conversation back to their existing contexts suggests a lack of concepts and language with which to discuss the new context. Nevertheless, there is evidence to show that the acquisition of knowledge about the higher education system in general and about specific institutions in particular was an important part of their anticipatory socialisation.

Berger and Luckmann (1966, 57-61) refer to the fact that interaction with others is made possible by access to available shared bodies of knowledge: the social stock of knowledge. For nearly all the intending students, a certain amount of information was ‘public knowledge’ in their existing contexts. Deakin University was well known to those in the Geelong area, and the sense of regionalism which characterises life in Gippsland ensured that the reputation of the Institute, referred to colloquially as ‘Gippy’, was a matter of considerable public interest and debate. In terms of access to the social stock of knowledge, Rosie was an exception. She was socially isolated because having an infant and two other young children circumscribed her activities considerably, and this was compounded by the fact that she was a newcomer to the country. She had to rely on the public media for information, while others had access to knowledgeable informants in professional associations and other contact networks in their local community.
One of the most noteworthy features of the anticipatory socialisation of the people interviewed was the close association between knowledge-gathering and self-assessment. This association was manifest in the importance of the role of friends in the decision-making process of which information-gathering and self-assessment are a part. Nearly all of the informants reported that they were personally acquainted with somebody who had either studied in the off-campus mode or who had studied the specific course which they had chosen. Dave, Brian, Mary, Peter, Andrew and Patrick all knew at least one person at their workplace who had undertaken off-campus study. They observed the progress of these people and assessed their own chances of success by comparison. They also used such friends as sources of ‘insider’ information:

Andrew: There were two staff here, I think, at the same time, doing similar courses through Deakin and they seemed to be enjoying it. I thought, ‘Oh, well, join the crowd, why not?’ Particularly when they - one of them said they’d be interested in doing this course, and just from that point of view, I feel, I’ve got a bit of an advantage. I can ask them about - just the format of things like, ‘How long have you discovered that you need to allow when you send things away?’ and, ‘When do things come back?’ Just their reaction to the whole process, um, just like if you’ve got an older brother who’s gone to school, I suppose, you find out a bit of information beforehand. I’m not going in stone cold... I intend to find out those sort of things. One needs to know the basis. (Interview 1, 8.2.88).

Several people reported having either a relative or a close friend, who was, or had been a mature-age student. As mentioned above, Cathy’s mother was a good role model.

Mary compared her situation to that of married women students she knew:

Mary: My sister-in-law in Melbourne - they have three children, my brother and herself, and um, she’s a trained nurse, and she’s just spent seven years doing Law part-time as well. Yet she manages. It’s amazing... I’ve seen some of the staff at school, too, the ladies who are full-time, yet they’re almost full-time housewives too, and I really don’t know how they manage, but they do... Sometimes I think, ‘Well, maybe if I had that pushing me a bit more, I’d get a bit more done.’ But then, um, p’raps it’s an advantage, if you like, being single. (Interview 1, 27.1.88).

Participation in the research project itself constituted an aspect of the students’ anticipatory socialisation. As a postgraduate student and staff member of one of the institutions, the researcher represented the institutional culture, and was cast by some of the participants in the roles of experienced insider and advanced student. Several mentioned that they hoped that participation in the project would enhance their
motivation. The invitation to participate carried assumptions that they were serious about adopting the role of student, and offered an opportunity to try out presenting themselves in this role. In addition, they could use the interviews to glean a range of information with which to assess both the institution and themselves. It was common, for instance, for participants to express interest in who else might be in the project, and how their own story compared with those of the others.

Even though there may be significant numbers of people in a community who have cultural knowledge relevant for new off-campus students, this knowledge may not be accessed. The social dimension of external study is frequently latent rather than actualised because people tend not to identify themselves as off-campus students in other social settings. A phenomenon reported by several of the informants was the fact that the anticipation of becoming a student created a change in their awareness. People categorised by other roles were now identified as students:

Betty: I’ve known other people that have gone to Gippy and done courses there, but it was surprising, after I’d sort of applied for it, how many more that I didn’t know were doing courses there would say, ‘Oh yes, I’m doing such and such at Gippy’, that sort of thing. (Interview 1, 20.2.88).

This experience sometimes created interesting adjustments to accepted definitions of relationships and realities. At first, Matthew chose to keep his identity as a Deakin student a very private matter, but he was interested to know of other people in his town who were enrolled with Deakin, and experienced some sense of shared identity.

MG: I think you told me a little while ago that you knew someone who had done a Deakin course?

Matthew: Yes.

MG: And that was your introduction to Deakin?

Matthew: Yes. She said it was manageable, that was the thing that really struck me. But in fact when I start thinking about it there are lots of people around who have completed Deakin degrees, but they just seem to come out of the woodwork. It’s something that you don’t necessarily know until you happen to drop the word ‘Deakin’, and then somebody says, ‘Oh, actually my sister, or my cousin, or I have, um, done a degree’, or ‘I’m half way through a degree and I’ve got a subject to go.’

MG: ... So there are people in the community who’ve done the degree, but you don’t identify them normally as Deakin people?

Matthew: No.

MG: You identify them by their profession or something. The sociology of that is interesting. It’s like a subterranean community.
Matthew: It's undefined until you - well, it's not undefined, it's non-obvious.

MO: It's potentially a community of people, but they never find out about each other, so they don't communicate.

Matthew: But you'd not be doing the same subjects. There can be some sort of - what's the word? - um, a bit like the old school tie, but not as obvious. From my point of view, once you find out the someone's a graduate from Monash medical school, there's a feeling of fraternity associated with that person, for no other reason than they happen to have gone through the same walls... I've had that sort of feeling, actually, seeing a car driving by that's got a Deakin sticker on it. I thought, 'Oh, well, yes, both go to the same university.' It means absolutely nothing in practicality. Except that you've got a feeling that - maybe it's a feeling that you're not alone in your struggle, someone else is struggling away in a different way, and perhaps if they're surviving, you might just survive too. (Interview 1, 1.2.88).

6.2.2.2 Interpreting the institution's cultural artefacts

Between notification that their application for a place in their chosen course had been successful, and receipt of the first parcel of course materials, the students received a variety of printed matter from their respective institutions. An examination of this material reveals it to be a rather motley collection, from enrolment forms and handbooks to introductory material from student organisations and advertisements from the campus shop for items such as T-shirts, car stickers and other memorabilia printed with the institutional logo. For off-campus students, the receipt of such material may constitute the first encounter with the institutional culture and the specific language by which the culture is encoded and expressed. Exposure to this language is an important part of the process of socialisation.

The various packaged materials are also an important source of 'recipe' knowledge. Of the students interviewed, Matthew seemed most aware of the significance of differences between on- and off-campus study in terms of how such knowledge is acquired:

Matthew: I've still got to get the jargon right for the particular university, because I did my basic degree at Monash, and, um, you just get to know the jargon by talking to other students, whereas in fact the only way I get the jargon is by reading the 1988 program handbook... I'm really quite impressed with the amount of knowledge - the amount of information that's available, the stuff that you would otherwise find in department notice
boards, or stuff hanging around the union building, or something like that. It all seems to get sent out to you. (Interview 1, 1.2.88)

In anthropological terms, such documents are not only functional objects, but cultural artefacts, incorporating both linguistic and other signs and symbols which derive from the practices, values and attitudes which constitute the institutional culture, and providing clues for the newcomer as to the nature of the culture. Discussing the content of socialisation to organisational cultures, Louis (1980) notes that there is usually little understanding by either organization or newcomer of the need to learn the culture of the organization. However, the printed matter dispatched does reveal some such understanding on the part of institutional personnel, notably those in service units such as the student organisations and the counselling services. For example, Deakin University’s stylishly produced booklet called Counselling Package, bore the following words on the front cover:

Finding your way into off-campus studies at Deakin... to share in the benefits of a culture.

The way the new students dealt with this collection of printed material varied, but in general, their answers to questions about what they had received from the institution in the period prior to the receipt of course materials indicate that they devoted much less energy to learning what they could about the culture of the institution from this material than they did to learning by word of mouth from friends and acquaintances. Some eagerly scanned everything which arrived in the search for wanted information, others, like Andrew, deferred dealing with the material. In this way they controlled to some extent the progress of the induction process.

Andrew: I read through all the Deakin material I had last night, just to make sure I’d done everything, and that was the first time I’d read some of the information. I just hadn’t sat down - I kept looking at the dates, and they always seemed to be well off in the future, and the fact that you were arriving today was enough spur to get me reading through things, and I’ve sorted out in my mind a bit better what I’ve let myself in for, and at this stage I think I’ll be alright. I even started reading books, too, but I’m still waiting on the first package. One of the bits of information says, ‘For your course the first package arrives some time in February. So I’m sort of waiting until that arrives now, before I get going, I think.

MG: What did you learn from what you read last night?

Andrew: One thing I learnt - well, the thing that surprised me was that I was constantly coming across ways to get out of the course. There was actually a covering letter, written by some gentleman, I can’t remember his name,
and he did say, 'Look, I'm not trying to put you off the course, or be a prophet of doom or something...' But he was trying to make everyone assess the time commitment they were making, and he was suggesting now is the time to re-adjust it rather than get part way into the course and get swamped by the workload... And there seemed to be lots of information about how to pull out of the course. Either you pull out within x weeks and some letter appeared on your sheet, and if you pulled out in the next couple of weeks a different letter appeared, and if you pulled out later on it was even worse and you got a fail or something like that. So it seemed to come through pretty loud and clear, all these different ways of pulling out of the course. P'raps I was thinking of pulling out at the time, I don't know, but that made an impression on me, all that information.
(Interview 1, 8.2.88).

Enrollees of both institutions commented on the amount of information about procedures to be adopted should the student decide to withdraw from the course. Doubtless experience has taught administrators to emphasise these matters, but these new recruits found the emphasis on withdrawal ironical and rather off-putting:

Diane: They seem to be very concerned about the drop-out. You know, 'If you drop out, please fill out this form and tell us why you've dropped out' and all this sort of thing. They send a lot of information about dropping out!... So I feel that bearing in mind that they are interested in trying to prevent you from dropping out and everything, that they should send you as much information as possible. Well, if everybody is like me and worried about the unknown, then they should try to tell you as much as possible.
(Interview 1, 21.2.88)

6.2.2.3 Knowing and not knowing

Anxiety about new experiences is exacerbated by the extent to which their content and contexts are unknown. In his essay on the social psychology of the stranger, Schutz (1964) uses the image of exploration and map-reading to explain the orientation process of the stranger, noting that until the stranger acquires a position and status within the new setting, he (or she) lacks a starting point from which to take bearings. Alice expressed this exactly:

Alice: Just at present, it's like going into unknown territory, you know, like exploring something. The thing is, I don't know where, really, to start.
(Interview 1, 6.2.88).

Although Alice officially held the status of student at that stage, it is clear that she had not yet been able to assume that status, she lacked the interpretive schemes which
could give her recipes for action. Off-campus students typically have scant resources from which to construct meaning frameworks for interpreting institutional communications and behaviour, but some have more resources available than others. Characteristically, Dave dealt with the uncertainties of the waiting period by activating his employment-based friendship network:

Dave: I was talking to Daryl, the fellow I mentioned before from work who’s done the course, we were having a few beers here, and I said, ‘I haven’t heard anything, it’s really disappointing, when do I get the information? I know when the weekend schools are, but is it for the whole weekend? The first weekend school’s on the 25th or 26th of February, and I’ve received no information. I’ve got no assignment, no class notes, haven’t got a book list. He said, ‘You’ll get that a couple of weeks before your weekend school, and then you’ll get a chance to get the books, and then your assignments will come, and all the rest of it...”

MG: So there’s this period of waiting and wondering... lots of unknowns?

Dave: Yair, a whole heap of unknowns.

MG: Although you’ve obviously taken opportunities to get information about the course from other people.

Dave: Mainly through friends who’ve done it.

MG: So you’re not going in blind.

Dave: I think even though you talk to people, you sort of think, though, it’s a whole new experience, and ah - seeing Daryl and Trevor and a few others go through it, it still does worry me about what’s going to happen, when do I find out, when do I get the first assignment, what’s it going to be like, that sort of stuff. (Interview 1, 31.1.88).

6.2.2.4 Waiting and wanting to get started

Certain differences in the way the two institutions conducted the induction process outlined above had significant effects on the subjective experience of the students. As mentioned above, the University dispatched a ‘Confirmation package’, which included booklists and a certain amount of course-specific information, in mid-December. According to the Assistant Registrar in charge of off-campus services (personal communication with the author, August, 1990), this was done with the deliberate intention of enabling students to get started with preliminary reading during the summer holiday period. On the other hand, for most courses conducted by the Institute, booklists were not sent to students until just prior to the first weekend school in February, and course materials were distributed at that school.
The comparative dearth of information experienced by the Gippsland students during January and February contributed considerably to their anxiety. Lynette was accustomed to studying and confident in her ability. Her comments indicate enthusiasm and the desire of a person who liked to be well organised and to have some control over the management of her study:

Lynette: Oh, I can’t wait. Can’t wait to get the first thing. Feel like ringing them up and saying, ‘When is it arriving?’. (Interview 1, 27.1.88)

Kaye reflected in hindsight on the waiting period:

Kaye: I’d enrolled, and I hadn’t heard anything, and I was really, ah, quite hungry for some more information... and at long last the thing came in saying that there was an Orientation Day, and there was no question in my mind of whether I would go or wouldn’t go, I was really looking forward to it. I suppose it was heralding the beginning of the course for me, and I was really keen. (Interview 1, 20.2.88)

It transpired in another part of the interview, quoted below in 6.2.3.4, that Kaye’s enthusiasm to get started was an indication of a mixture of high expectations of the course and anxiety about her ability to succeed.

The situation of these students is in marked contrast to that of Matthew, enrolled in the School of Humanities at Deakin, whose course materials arrived in January, and John, also enrolled with Deakin. These people were interviewed on 1 and 10 February respectively, and both had by then made a start by reviewing and evaluating the course content, and making themselves familiar with aspects of its management, such as assessment requirements and deadlines. Inconsistencies occur, however. Andrew, also enrolled with Deakin, had not received course materials when interviewed on 8 February. Note the off-campus student’s lack of knowledge about what can be expected as normal institutional practice:

Andrew: I haven’t felt the need to ring up yet, but I do feel a little lost - it really doesn’t seem yet to be a specific time things have to be done. P’raps that’s because my first package hasn’t arrived, so in a way I haven’t really got under way. I’m not quite sure what I’ll have to do or when the first bit of work will be due in, so in a way a bit of the unknown. P’raps the thing that worries me is - when should the first package be here by? There didn’t seem to be a specific date. (Interview 1, 8.2.88).

To conclude this section on anticipatory socialisation, the following extract from a conversation with Diane recorded in the fourth week of February is chosen because the
subjective state which she expressed is quite representative of the participants' experiences. It includes: high anxiety associated with a characteristically female low estimation of ability and determination to succeed; attempts to diminish the extent of the unknown; and the construction of interpretive schemes in relative isolation.

MG: Would you tell me about the Orientation Day?
Diane: Oh, it was useful to go, but they promised things that they didn't really deliver. They said they would have sessions on assignment writing, and they didn't. I mean when you're going back to study after twenty years or something - I'm just terrified, absolutely terrified. Of the unknown. Not knowing what they're going to expect of me. And so I would have loved them to, you know, come through with their promise on the assignment writing. And just what would be expected in exams and things like that. I mean obviously once you're over the first year you know what's expected of you, and it must be fairly easy then, but the first year is terrifying. I mean that's when they get the big drop out. But in other things it was good. They had a good tour of the library, and showed us how it worked... But I would have liked something on note-taking while you're reading a book. I mean I don't know how to take notes. I've tried, and I take too long notes. I've already read the first chapter of the Accounting text book, and I find I read the whole page, and I turn the page and I think, 'Wait a minute, I haven't absorbed - nothing's stayed in there.' ... So I tried taking notes, to try to make me concentrate on it, but I practically write out the whole page again, so I don't know how to take notes from a book...

MG: I guess the Orientation Day filled in some of that unknown for you?
Diane: Yes, oh, it did, but I've just got so many more questions. I wish they would issue, you know, past exams, or something like that. I know it's not until June, but I worry about it now. I worry about, you know, when I'm reading a chapter, 'What am I supposed to be absorbing here?'

MG: I wonder if you'll have an opportunity to put those questions to anyone next weekend?
Diane: They're very accessible there. I rang up. I started reading chapter 1 and it didn't add up to what he said - you know, for the course covered this semester, so I rang the Institute and asked to speak to the head of Accounting. They gave me his private line. I was very impressed that I was able to get through to him like that. And he said, 'Oh my goodness, you've read chapter 1!' Practically unheard of, apparently, a student jumping in and reading the first day she got the book. And he said, 'Oh, no, no, you're right, that's not what you're supposed to read. If you must read something, read chapter 5.'... I'm terrified of failing, I suppose. I just
want to know how hard it's going to be and whether I'm going to be able to do it. That's all. We really haven't received much information from the Institute yet. I mean I rush out to the mailbox every day, and - nothing there again - so we really haven't started. Don't start till next weekend.

(Interview 1, 21.2.88)

6.2.3 Encounter

The student experiences quoted below which have been defined as encounter experiences occurred at various times in the period January to March 1988. As a stage in the process of socialisation, encounter is not as clearly marked in the experience of new off-campus students as it is for recruits in many organisational settings, or even for 'freshmen' in traditional educational institutions, where new students encounter peers, staff and their academic program all within a short space of their arrival on campus for the beginning of the academic year. Another important difference is the dispersal of the cohort. Some off-campus students, like some of those in this sample who were enrolled with the Gippsland Institute, have an encounter experience comparable to that of 'traditional' students, that is, on the campus and in company with peers. Others receive the institution, as represented by packaged course materials and other material manifestations of its culture, into their homes. In such circumstances, which are more typical of distance education, encounter is a solitary experience devoid of the impact of the physical reality of campus as the locus of the culture.

In interactionist terms, social actors are actively engaged during encounter experiences in creating new meanings, constructing a definition of the situation, structuring ambiguous social settings and attempting to solve problems (Mortimer and Simmons, 1978, 430). It is therefore a stage in socialisation when perceptions of others' behaviours are especially important, and when, for those such as off-campus students, isolation may have critical effects.

The encounter experiences of the people interviewed varied according to the different policies of the two institutions and the degree of choice or agency exercised by the students. As indicated in the foregoing discussion of the institutional approaches to induction, the Institute provided more opportunities for peer contact than the University. Within the constraints of their personal circumstances and the limitations of the opportunities made available by the institutions, the students interviewed exercised choice as to whether they encountered the organisational culture alone or in cohort. In spite of the inducements offered, some of the Institute students chose not to take advantage of the available opportunities for contact with peers and staff. Some of the Deakin students were content with their solitary perusal of the package of well
prepared learning materials which constituted their first real encounter with the university.

The participants who had the least face-to-face contact with other members of the institutional setting were Deakin students Matthew, Alice, Rosie, Ingrid and Andrew, and Institute students Mary and Peter. Andrew and Peter withdrew at an early stage. Peter's inability to attend weekend schools contributed to his early withdrawal from the course. Geographic distance was a significant isolating factor for all of the others except Matthew. Ingrid overcame some of the isolation of distance by travelling by rail from Gippsland to Melbourne to attend weekend seminars at the University's Study Centre in Flinders Street. She also had contact, mainly by telephone, with a peer group network formed during an earlier period of off-campus study. Alice had limited contact with others who were studying the same courses by attending weekend seminars held at the Melbourne Study Centre. Rosie was able to attend an orientation session at this Centre, but the need for childcare was a barrier to attendance at weekend seminars.

Matthew and Mary both chose to forgo peer contact. Mary made sure before enrolling that weekend schools were not compulsory for the Institute course she wanted to study, and in the course of her two years attended only one such seminar, preferring to rely on a local peer network comprised mainly of other teachers. Matthew's choice of private study was occasioned in part by the demands of his busy medical practice, and in part by the particular tensions of his approach to the experience, which was intensely meaningful for him in personal terms. The complexities of this meaning and its effect on his approach are explored in Chapter 7.

The following two extracts from interviews are chosen to illustrate the possibilities of encounter conducted in concert with peers, and encounter as a solitary experience.

6.2.3.1 The positive value of peers

In analysing the sources of knowledge about organisations available to recruits, the ratio between the knowledge that comes from official sources and that which comes from peers is an important consideration. Discussing the relative importance of these sources in terms of the newcomer's experience, Brim and Wheeler (1976, 85) estimate that initial adjustment is likely to be an inverse function of that ratio, with those newcomers who have been guided by their peers experiencing the least shock on entry. If Keegan's (1986) definition of distance education as the privatisation of institutional learning is accepted, the amount of peer contact available and/or engaged in must be an especially important factor for investigation in any study of the socialisation of off-campus students.
Dave knew the value of peers because his work in the ambulance service was predicated on teamwork, usually in pairs. I was able to observe something of this work culture by interviewing him at his workplace on two occasions, and believe that his utilisation of work-based 'mateship' relationships should not be interpreted as dependency. His security in these relationships was an asset at the first Gippsland weekend school, when hundreds of students crowded onto the campus:

Dave: I rang up Trevor and he said, 'Yes, I'm going on Saturday, I'll pick you up and we'll go down together.' That was good. So on the way down he told me the things to expect, and I had him to show me around, where the coffee was, and all that sort of stuff. Otherwise I was actually frightened of going, because I mean, knowing what tertiary institutions can be like, and not having been there, I wouldn't even know which door to go through. So Trevor was like my mother duck. He took me around all over the campus showing me where my lecture rooms were, where the library was, and the bookshop, where to get my photo taken for the card. He was really great.

But the first school was just overwhelming. I just couldn't believe how many people would be there. It was a bit like going to Meyers on a sale day. A sea of faces and none of them looked familiar and everyone looked rather serious about what they were doing, probably all trying to work out where the bookshop is and how to get a photo done, or all trying to work out where in the hell 1N101 or whatever the classroom they are looking for is, like some of us were. I mean people are social, like at lunch time, you know. I'm sitting on the lawn to have my lunch and people come over and say, 'Hi, how are you going?' sort of thing. And they sit down and they are doing Psychology so you chat about Psychology and they ask you about Business Admin., and that's fine. You talk to two or three people that you've never met before, that's great, but out of the thousand or so people that you see in a day, you get to know two or three. It's very overwhelming. (Interview 2, 28.5.88).

6.2.3.2 Communication via the printed word

Matthew was pleasantly surprised by the communicative capacity of the materials which arrived from Deakin. The course team succeeded in engaging him in 'dialogue' with himself and with the text. This suited Matthew, whose approach was mature and reflective. He appreciated the attempts by members of the team to personalise their own roles in the communication but found them somehow unconvincing. He felt
inadequately prepared for the task of contributing to the communication in the required form, that is, by written assignment, which loomed as an intimidating form of self-exposure. The absence of peers and other informal sources of information intensified his apprehension.

MG: Were you impatient for the stuff to come?
Matthew: Yes and no. I mean, having said I was going to do it I thought, 'Yair, this is fantastic, let's get started.' But when the stuff actually arrived I thought, 'Well, this is it!' And the stuff arrived earlier than I was expecting. I got it in January... When it arrived I just sat down and went through and through and through it. And it surprised me how good it was, both in quality and readability... So I've had my first drop, if that's the word, and that's got my study guide, my reader, plus a lot of um photocopied stuff... a newsletter from the department, um, all in very sort of friendly chatty terms, but you think to yourself, 'Who the hell is this guy that's being so friendly?' But you get a feeling of warmth from that... then there's a whole lot of things on how to write essays and whatever. which, I find that a real problem, how to write essays, 'cause the last time I wrote essays was in first year sociology...

I'm really quite surprised with the quality of the presentation, it's beautiful, and the content - I mean I've really been quite excited to read this stuff, one, because it really does interest me, and two, I thought it would be pretty drab and boring, and I'd be just handed a few sheets with a couple of essay topics, and then, 'You read the books, student', but it's not like that at all... There are things like, um, this book asks me questions, ah - oh, first of all, it suggested somewhere along the way here that I have a journal, I write down my thoughts in it, and then all through this, after half a dozen paragraphs, sometimes only two, it asks me a whole series of things, um, and I quote, 'What is your general attitude to religion?' 'Do any of the following represent your view?' 'Note down your ideas in your journal.' All the way through it suggests that I do that, but I just wonder whether I actually will. I mean, even though it's in the first three weeks of the term and I should be toeing the line perfectly, I'm not sure whether I'll get around to doing it. But that's the sort of thing I can remember doing in tutes... I might find that essential as time goes on, I suppose. But looking up front, this first essay is the thing that's really - it's really got me by the ah - it's got me right between the cycs.

(Interview 1, 1.2.88).
6.2.3.3 Surprise and sense-making

Experiences of change, contrast and surprise are typically part of encounter, as is the activity of sense-making (Louis, 1980). Brian was the last person to be interviewed in the first round. He was also one of the closest to the university campus, and was able to attend tutorials held there. When interviewed towards the end of March, he described his encounter with the course materials and also his first tutorial. The former was a solitary experience which gave him quite a shock. The tutorial provided both peers who could validate his reaction to the course materials, and an intermediary in the person of the tutor. An intermediary is somebody who can interpret the culture of the organisation to outsiders, clients or newcomers. In this case the tutor was a senior member of the local school teaching fraternity who was also a graduate of the university’s School of Education. As an accomplished member of both Brian’s professional arena and the university culture he was equipped to be an effective intermediary, and his role in Brian’s sense-making process proved to be crucial. The role of language in the shock experienced by Brian should be noted; his encounter is essentially a linguistic experience.

Brian: I sat down and I sweated my way through this stuff - I don’t do much reading - I haven’t done much reading in the past - and to all of a sudden be confronted with these huge volumes, you should see them, of reading. I thought, ‘My goodness, what have I got myself into?’ and I said, – came the day of paying the fees, three hundred and twenty-eight dollars. I thought, you know, ‘This could be three hundred and twenty eight dollars down the tube very quickly.’ I’m reasonably stubborn, and I thought, ‘No, blow it, I’ll stick it out’, and so I went to the first tute and it was excellent...

Once you got over the shock of the reading, and once you started to get into it, your reading skills came back again, but I couldn’t believe the first book I looked into, in about the first paragraph I came across five words that I’d never even heard of before. Paradigm was one of them. I thought, ‘Oh, oh,’ you know, ‘Bang! So if I sit with a dictionary beside me -’ I think, you know, ‘This is awful!’ Once you get into the jargon, it’s fine, that’s where the tute was good, because he would say, ‘This is jargon, and this is part of it. When you do your assignments, you mention this, because this is what they’re looking for, evidence that you’ve read this and that you’re familiar with the terms.’... I thought, ‘Maybe they’re trying to, you know, lay it on a little bit thick first off.’ And that was the first thing the tutor said, ‘You get hit very hard first up.’... So, ‘Phew,’ I said, ‘That’s alright!’
MG: Have you had any chance to compare notes with other students?
Brian: Yes, at the tutes. When I first walked in, this woman, I’d taught with her husband, the first thing - I said ‘Hello’, she said ‘Hello’, she said, ‘Can you cope with the jargon?’ ... And the others at the tute all said the same. So I thought, you know, ‘Uh huh.’ (Interview 1, 24.3.88)

6.2.3.4 Continuing self-assessment

The first group experience of off-campus study has a special quality of novelty which derives in part from the fact that it occasions newcomers, at least temporarily, and perhaps for the first time, to identify themselves and others as students. The responses of some of the women participants to the interviewer’s attempts to draw them out on the subject of their reactions to meeting peers suggests that they were interested in how other women managed the combination of multiple roles. Implicit in Betty’s description of her encounter with another female student is the need to allay self-doubts:

MG: So you got to talk to people at the Orientation Day?
Betty: Oh, yes, there was quite a bit of talking, just sitting with someone while you’re waiting, or lunch time, something like that. Quite a bit of contact.

MG: Was that important for you?
Betty: Oh, I think so, you didn’t feel as though you were the only one there.
Everyone else felt just as unsure about it as you did. You know, I looked at one girl there, she sort of intrigued me, I s’pose she’d be in middle thirties. I found out she left school at the end of year nine, it was eighteen years since she left school, and last year she decided to go back and do her HSC. She did two subjects, and she had four children, ten year old twins and a four year old and a two year old. She was really good to talk to because, you know, just to find out how she coped, you know, how she managed to fit her life in around the studies, and being so positive about it, too. (Interview 1, 20.2.88)

As well as demonstrating the kind of anxiety typically experienced by the women students in the pre-entry phase, Kaye’s description of her first visit to the campus as a student illustrates the newcomer’s preoccupation with discovering the norms of the new setting. Her account is especially valuable because of her candour about the emotional content of the experience, the graphic quality of her descriptions and her capacity for self-reflection.

Kaye: The Orientation Day was really great. The content - I didn’t really learn much, but seeing other people in the same situation of hesitancy and being
unsure made me feel a lot more confident... While I felt motivated, I was really worried I might lose my motivation, 'cause I'm really a physical person rather than an academic, probably. It really motivated me into actually starting reading, starting work straight away, whereas I was very hesitant and lacking in confidence about the course before that... I've seen children look like lost souls on their first day at school, and I really had an appreciation of how they felt. When I walked into this room... I found myself sitting in the back-most seat, closest to the door, when I first went in, and we had to return to that room later in the afternoon, and it was really strange - I found myself waltzing in not caring whether I sat half way down, 'cause in that day I had gained that amount of confidence in what I was doing.

MG: That's interesting. You're obviously very alert to the meanings of those sorts of things, and self-observant.

Kaye: I see it every day in children and people I deal with, so I can see it in myself... But that was interesting to me, I could actually feel myself relaxing. I actually felt physically ill in the first half hour of the first thing we had to do down there. It was awful...really claustrophobic about the whole thing, and unsure...I felt like an ant walking in and sitting in the back corner.

MG: Did you?

Kaye: A really intense ant with a really tight stomach. It was dreadful. And the lecturer was way down there spouting out all these things, it was just going all round my head. But I think it was just because I was really anxious and unsure how was I going to cope with the whole thing. And suddenly I was confronted with it.

MG: So, what happened?

Kaye: Well, during the day I sort of followed along, I s'pose. We went into the library, and I thought it wasn't bad, we weren't being asked to do anything, or make fools of ourselves, or asked impossible things, and bit by bit things that people said along the way were helpful... Different people were a bit humorous, had a bit of a sense of humour, and that broke the barriers down a little bit.

MG: Tell me a bit more about that.

Kaye: One woman gave a mock lecture, she was fantastic, just an amazing lady, she spoke about values. When I walked into the lecture theatre I noticed that there were six points on the board... so I just jotted down what was on the board, in case it was relevant, and she talked about values and wants, she needed this but wanted a fur coat. She went on and on, she was very
funny. So then she said, ‘Right, that’s the end of the lecture, I want you to
swing your scats round and get into groups’. We all had to look at each
other’s sheets. Mine looked reasonably coherent. I actually had taken
similar things to someone else in the group, and it didn’t look, you know,
so bad that it was way out of place at all. Then she called us back together
and she said, ‘Right oh, hands up those who wrote the points on the board
first. OK, that’s a good thing to do.’ And I thought, ‘Oh, phew.’ Not that
it really mattered, but it’s a very human trait, isn’t it, not to want to differ
too much from the norm. So we’d done that quite well and then she said,
‘Who wrote down about the fur coat?’ This incredible lady who hadn’t
shut up all day had written down about the fur coat. She said, ‘That’s
absolute trivia, you don’t write stuff like that down, love.’ So it was a
really good lesson on taking notes, and that was something I’d wondered
about. So that was really good, that session, I felt really good. And then
we went for lunch.

MG: So would you agree that one of the things in the back of everyone’s mind,
going into a new situation, is ‘What is normal here?’

Kaye: Mm... I did speak to some of the other people there about some of my
feelings, people I met. The Caff, for instance, was great at lunch time. I
met a group of women from Yarram. They were looking really tentative,
and I thought, ‘Hey, they’re looking even more tentative than I feel. We
had a chat, and they were all sort of saying, ‘Oh, we didn’t know where to
go or what to do, or whether she would ask that question’... It seemed to
me they were only worrying about deviating too far from the norm,
appearing to be perhaps out of place, or extremists, one way or the other.
They had the same feelings too, which was good. I felt better, ‘cause I was
normal, like them, they were feeling similar things to me.

MG: It sounds like one of the messages you were given there was: in this
situation it is normal to be uncertain.

Kaye: Mm...well, that lecturer in the social science group, he said, ‘If you’re
reading books and not remembering anything, don’t worry, that’s perfectly
normal’. And, um, ‘We don’t want you to know anything here, really,
you’re not meant to know everything.’ That’s probably the best comment I
heard all day. (Interview 1, 20.2.88)

The negotiation of her new identity as a student with others in her ‘home’ local context
began at about the same time and proved to be problematic for Kaye. Like Alice, she
preferred, in some circumstances, to remain a ‘secret student’:

Kaye: I haven’t told very many people here what I’m doing. I mean I don’t see it
as relevant really, but one of the guys this morning said something about passing me on the highway the other morning, and I said, ‘Oh, yes, I’d been down to Gippy Institute’, without even thinking. And, ‘Oh, what are you doing down there?’ And I felt like saying, ‘I’m doing the cleaning’, or ‘I’m the gardener’ or something, but I said, ‘Oh, I’ve just started a course’. And he said, ‘What sort of course’, and I said, ‘Oh, something that’ll lead’ - here I was avoiding all the time - and I said, ‘Oh, something that might lead to doing a bit of child counselling.’ And he said, ‘Oh welfare?’ And I said, ‘No, social science’. And he said, ‘What do you mean?’, and I said, ‘Oh, it’s a Bachelor of Arts but in social sciences, and p’raps majoring in psych., if things go well.’ And he said, ‘Oh, a degree!’ I hadn’t really thought that way, so that’s probably why I don’t tell people up here what I’m doing.’ (Interview 1, 20.2.88).

Kaye’s account illustrates the degree of strangeness which can be experienced by some people who undertake to enter higher education as off-campus students, and the intensity of accompanying emotional states. Referring back to Figure 2 in Chapter 5, perhaps the most remarkable feature of this stage of the socialisation experience of these new off-campus students is its duration. As much as five months elapsed from the first action taken, that is the submission of an application for a tertiary place, which signifies a point of decision-making, to the encounter with the institutional culture.

Although some virtually dismissed the prospect of study from their minds for much of this time, most of the students interviewed experienced a cumulative sense of anticipation, which in some cases was accompanied by considerable nervous tension. Most were hungry for information and prepared to seek it from the institution and from other sources. However, the tendency to privatise the experience was also evident in several cases. The students’ experiences of the succeeding stages of adjustment and assimilation are described in Chapter 7.
CHAPTER 7 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA: WITHDRAWAL OR COMMITMENT

7.1 Withdrawal

Attrition, withdrawal, or drop-out has long been the subject of research and debate by distance educators (Baath, 1982; James and Wedermeyer, 1959; Kember, 1981; Kennedy and Powell, 1976; Malley, Brown and Williams, 1976; Roberts, 1984;). High attrition rates reflect negatively on the quality of the educational experiences offered and on the cost-efficiency of distance education enterprises. Both survey and ethnographic research on the subject is complicated by the fact that the reasons for student withdrawal are difficult to ascertain. Both circumstantial and complex psychological factors are involved, and because of the connotations of failure associated with withdrawal, students may choose to mask the psychological factors by attributing their withdrawal to force of circumstances. Definition and classification present further difficulties, since administrative codes used to indicate enrolment status may not be meaningful in terms of the students’ realities.

The approach to the subject chosen here is consistent with an emphasis on sociological phenomena from the perspective of the students’ subjective realities. The intention is to understand both the circumstances of withdrawal and how disengagement from the institutional culture is experienced.

7.1.1 The circumstances of withdrawal

Of the sample of seventeen people who were interviewed in 1988, six did not re-enrol in 1989. Andrew and Peter were effectively non-starters; they had a minimum of engagement with the course materials, and withdrew without attempting an assignment. In view of a certain ambivalence exhibited at the first interview, and his subsequent change in employment, Andrew's withdrawal would appear to be associated with uncertainty about career direction. At the end of 1988 he left his position as boarding master in a private secondary school in provincial Victoria for the adventure of a more senior position in a boarding school for Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory.

For three people, the main factor contributing to withdrawal was the addition of another child to the family. As mentioned in Chapters 5 and 6, both Rosie and Lynette gave birth in the first part of 1988, and both found it impossible to combine study with the demands of mothering. It also proved impossible for Peter to attend weekend schools and give his wife and first child adequate support through her pregnancy and
the infancy of the second child.

Peter: It was trying to sort out all the things in terms of how Barbara and I relate that was really hard. I was sort of fairly unrealistic, or very unrealistic about what I was going to do in terms of wander off for the weekend or sit down here and do some study or lock myself in a room somewhere and let her worry about everything else, and that just creates a really unhealthy tension. You can't do that, in retrospect. (Interview 2, 2.6.88).

Mark's decision to defer completion of his Graduate Diploma in Education rather than re-enrol in 1989 was associated with major disruptions in his personal life which included marital break-up and overseas travel associated with his employment.

Having achieved his goal of testing his competence in anthropology, John did not re-enrol at Deakin after completing first semester in 1988. The reason he gave for not proceeding to complete the degree was that he could not satisfactorily balance the time demands of career, family and study, and chose not to sacrifice family.

Inadequate time was the common element in the accounts of these six people. For all the married students who withdrew, the time required for family commitments constituted a major component of the reasons for withdrawal. All of the teachers interviewed, including the two who withdrew, Andrew and Peter, mentioned the extra time commitment demanded by a process of programs review and evaluation taking place in Victorian secondary schools in 1988.

7.1.2 The experience of withdrawal

From the perspective of the off-campus student, the transition in status represented by the process of withdrawal is characterised by a certain lack of definition. Frequently the decision to withdraw is preceded by a period of indecision in which the student refuses to confront the reality that they have fallen irretrievably behind:

Andrew: ...it sat here on the desk... because I had my own school work on top of it, and once I got through that pile it was next, but I never seemed to get the top pile empty, it just kept staying on the bottom of the pile, which I suppose was convenient too, but there it was and I kept piling other stuff on top and I just didn't get to it and so that was a bit of concern too. I put it in my list of priorities but I just couldn't get it up high enough because I'm not employed to do a course at Deakin. I'm employed to be involved in teaching and administration here. They really had to come first. (Interview 2, 20.6.88).
Sometimes the student's ambivalence about the decision was accompanied by uncertainty about their official status with the institution:

Peter: I really don’t know the technical state of where I’m up to. I suppose I got really annoyed because the initial material took an enormously long time to come. Or that’s what it felt like... I knew things were happening this year and I expected to be caught up about this time and be very busy, which I am, and when the stuff didn’t come and didn’t come and all sorts of other things happened, I’ve just, you know, I really don’t know what I’ve done. I wrote them a letter, but I’m not sure whether I’ve deferred or totally withdrawn from the course... I don’t know, I think I have exited. Well, I wrote and they sent me all my money back ... So I think I’m out entirely, though I was never really in very far. (Interview 2, 2.6.88).

Of the six described above, the most clearly defined cases were those of Peter and Andrew, whose status as non-starters was officially confirmed by the refund of the fees paid on enrolment, and of John and Mark, who received official confirmation of partial completion. Hoping to struggle on with a reduced load, Lynette withdrew from only two of the four subjects of her Graduate Diploma in Education course before the end of first semester, but in the event was unable to complete the year, so recorded a failure for the remaining two subjects. Similarly, although she was unable to complete the assessment requirements for her first semester subjects, Rosie decided not to cancel her enrolment for second semester in the hope that she might be able to set aside enough time to continue. She did this in spite of being advised that she risked an official ‘failure’ rather than ‘withdrawal’ on her student record.

Another source of indefinite demarcation of the status transition is the students' unwillingness to accept finality in relation to their aspirations. Andrew expressed the intention of making a second start on the course in 1989, and Peter spoke of the possibility of future enrolment with a different institution which did not have a compulsory on-campus requirement. In terms of his own learning agenda, John was a completer, and he did not rule out the possibility of finishing the degree at a later date. Both Rosie and Lynette expressed the intention of returning to study, but in the mean time had to try to come to terms with having to defer the achievement of their goals for some considerable time. The factor of family mobility as a gender issue has been mentioned above. Rosie had already interrupted her degree course with the UK Open University in order to accompany her husband to Australia, where she had to manage three small children without the support of extended family and friendship networks. Eventual return to the UK in 1990 entailed complete withdrawal from Deakin University.
In spite of regarding their aspirations as deferred rather than defeated, the students had to come to terms with feelings of failure and regret. Part of this process was the reappraisal of expectations in the light of experience:

Peter: Well, I was really enthusiastic, I was really looking forward to doing it... and now, I mean I was really quite disappointed with myself in mucking the whole thing up...

I have never really done that before, I’ve always tended to succeed in the end... It was a real eye opener in how I coped with it too. Not very well, but I think the biggest thing that I’ve learnt is that you’ve got to be realistic initially... (Interview 2, 2.6.88).

In coming to terms with the fact that mothering took precedence over studying, both Lynette and Rosie felt relief from the stress of trying to cope with both, as well as loss and regret. In both cases these feelings were accompanied by a philosophical, but positive appreciation of the joys of motherhood. Of all the people interviewed, Rosie was the one who expressed the most positive enjoyment of learning for its own sake, a fact which makes her comments especially poignant.

MG: You said you felt relief when you made the decision but then you felt unhappy about that as time went on?

Rosie: I just felt I was a failure, really. I suppose not coping with study and three children is not something that you would feel terribly bad about, but I suppose I’d set so much on it. I could see everything I was going to gain from it, and I suppose by the same token I could see everything I was going to lose by not doing it. But then, if I actually sit down and think about it sensibly I realise I would have lost a lot of fun with the children and I would have spent a lot of time shouting at them and being very rattled with them because I wasn’t on top of everything. I suppose that was a relief that I could just push that to one side and just enjoy them.

The children won’t ever really be ‘my thing’ because they’re John’s as well, but I mean he spends very little time at home. He’s off at 6.30 in the morning and back at 7.30 at night and mostly they are in bed by then so it’s really weekends he spends with them. So I suppose in a way they are my thing and I just wanted to do a really good job with them. I suppose it really just brought it home to me, having the third and the last one and a really lovely baby, that this would be the last chance I’d get to do all this, and so - does that make sense? ...
One day when the children are at school that's what I'd really love to do, actually go to college, university or whatever and do a full time course in Art History. I think that would be wonderful. That's my next ambition. No matter if they say I'm too old or too uneducated or whatever, I'm sure I'll try hard enough for it. (Interview 2, 10.6.88).

In terms of institutional responsibility for withdrawal, two comments can be made here. Andrew was enrolled in the same course as Brian, and expressed a similar initial dismayed reaction to the course materials which presented a massive reading task and much unfamiliar terminology, but he did not have the advantage of the tutorial help which Brian found so beneficial. Peter mentioned the delay in arrival of the first batch of course materials of which other Institute students complained. In both cases these institutional factors contributed to the effects of wavering motivation. In terms of the gendered construction of the student experience, the effect of motherhood in this sample is obvious and not surprising. It is noteworthy that the two men who were identified in Chapter 5 as partners in marital relationships in which traditional roles were being re-negotiated were among the students whose withdrawal was associated with the pressures of family responsibilities.

7.2 Integration and adjustment

Following the schema for the socialisation process outlined in Chapter 5 (Figure 3) the remainder of this chapter is devoted to the students' experiences after the initial encounter period, that is, between March 1988 and November 1989. In the organisational theory of socialisation on which the schema is based, growing identification with the new and integration with the institutional culture accompany and help to propel the stage of adaptation. The content of the adaptation stage includes situational adjustments in previously established contexts as well as developments in the degree of integration to the new context (Becker, 1964). In the subjective experience, integration is experienced in terms of changes in sense of personal identity and sense of affiliation to the institutional culture. A crucial issue in successful adaptation is commitment, a concept which has been elaborated by Becker (1964) and applied to the situation of off-campus students by Herrmann (1988). The process of adaptation accompanies the process of becoming an insider. If the latter process is well advanced, then metamorphosis can be said to have occurred.

In interactionist terms, adaptation entails arriving at a definition of the situation which is shared by others in the setting, and participating in shared culture-specific structures of meaning. Locating his argument in the conceptual framework of social phenomenology, Meacham (1984) defines student support in distance education as the facilitation
of the process of negotiation whereby off-campus students construct a view of teaching and learning consistent with that currently held by the educational institution. Teaching and learning are not merely acts of communication, but acts of negotiation:

In an educational institution, the teacher’s definition of reality will normally dominate the situation as they have legitimate institutional power which they use to transform students perceptions, through controlling the negotiating process. However, considerable negotiation does occur, with students attempting to set up norms regarding the appropriate quantity and quality of work, then attempting to get such norms accepted and validated by their teachers. To some extent, traditional teaching can be seen as taking place in an arena: a sphere of cooperation, conflict and negotiation between individuals who are involved in a common enterprise (Meacham, 1984, 47).

Meacham argues that the attainment of success is problematic for off-campus students because the fact that their social milieux are remote from that of the institution means that they are relatively unaware of prevailing norms and definitions, and play a negligible part in the negotiating process. Accepting that the institutions have responsibilities for educational outcomes, he poses the institutional dilemma in relation to student support as follows:

To impose non-negotiable rules on external students makes the educational process external students undergo, fundamentally different to that of the on campus students, but to allow distance learners to invent their own realities in isolation is a recipe for failure. Student support means helping students to develop a view of learning which is satisfying to the individual and acceptable to the institution (Meacham, 1984, 48).

In the remainder of this chapter, the off-campus student experience is presented in terms of marginality, arenas for interaction, and negotiation of definitions and meanings. Some assessment is attempted of the degree to which integration and metamorphosis occurred for participants in this study. Since the context of the socialisation process at issue is an educational setting, the concepts of knowledge, learning and teaching held by students and staff are considered to be crucial elements in the meaning structures which constitute the cultures under consideration.

7.2.1 Degrees of marginality and isolation

The following extracts are chosen as examples of the kinds of things participants said about the way they experienced off-campus study and their situation vis-a-vis the rest
of the institution. The participants quoted could compare their experience as off-campus students not only with previous experience as students in the tertiary system, but also with other models of teaching and learning in which they were actively involved. For example, Dave, Matthew and Mary were each engaged in teaching in their professional capacities: Dave was instructing at the ambulance training school, Matthew was engaged in nurse education, and Mary was teaching in a secondary school.

Both Dave and Matthew expressed some difficulty in making the adjustment to a form of communication attenuated by distance and rendered impersonal by the fact that a large proportion of the communication which passed between institution and student was administrative in style and content. Both felt depersonalised by the administrative practice of identification by number, which tended to produce the impression that the institution was monolithic and that 'it' was not interested in them personally.

Dave had a low sense of involvement with the Institute. Even though he attended weekend schools and had access to a peer support network at work, he experienced off-campus study as a reasonably efficient but mechanical system in which the isolated consumer was forced to resort to self-reliance:

MG: You’ve described yourself as a ‘people person’. You enjoy interaction. Whereas external studies as a way of learning has minimum face-to-face contact. How does that affect you?

Dave: I think I would probably do better with more involvement with tutors... I mean it’s a very individualistic sort of thing, external studies, isn’t it? As I said, before, if you really didn’t want to, you wouldn’t have to go to weekend schools. You could still pass this course, you’d just have to put a bit more work in. I get a lot out of the sessions down at the Institute, but if I was doing this at a local institution I could ring my lecturer up and say, ‘Look, I don’t understand this, can I call by for a visit?’ Say I’ve got half a day off on a Tuesday, I could call around, I’d be learning a lot better, I’d be feeling a lot more comfortable.

MG: Does that include sort of feeling part of the place?

Dave: Well, I don’t feel part of Gippsland at all. I feel that it’s individualistic and it takes a lot of motivation, and perhaps due to those things that I mentioned before, work, family and all those other things I would like to do, I haven’t got the application to do extremely well. If I had the ability to walk up to the tutor and say, ‘I don’t understand that, will you run me through it?’ - I’m sure I would be able to get much better marks than I can now when I sit down and say, ‘What did he say? It was three weeks ago-
what did he say?' I mean they always say you can ring and talk, but obviously, I've not tried to ring anyone, so that's my fault. No, that's not right, I have tried, and I just couldn't get through. But I'm sure they don't just sit in their office waiting for me to ring either, to clarify points, they have other responsibilities as well.

MG: At work, you are very much a part of the ambulance system. That's the feeling I get.

Dave: Oh yes, I like to feel part of the system.

MG: But this form of study doesn't offer you that?

Dave: No. Not really. You know, you feel like you're, well, you're very much a number, because on everything that comes out to you, you are just a number. I mean I know that's part of the deal and they have to have student numbers and stuff like that, but you get the stuff sent to you, the study guides and that, and it says, 'Dear 888424' - or whatever my number is, 'Have you got two double sided sheets on green paper marked study guide four? If you haven't, ring us and tell us. If you've got this, good luck, here's your assignment.'

MG: Sounds like a production line in an industrial system.

Dave: I am sure it's a very efficient way of running external studies, I'm not saying I could think of a better way to run an external studies department, but external studies seems to be difficult. (Interview 2, 28.5.88).

Matthew seized upon communications which gave him more personal images, such as photographs and audiotapes, but experienced confusion because he lacked an adequate knowledge base for interpretation of institutional inconsistencies and contradictions:

Matthew: I know the professor because I've seen his photograph in The Age Saturday supplement. I thought, 'Well, that's good, at least I know who this guy is, I can eyeball him, I can sort of throw darts at him!' But not knowing the people - not having attended lectures - the tapes, I found, were excellent... I found the tapes fascinating and I suppose that gave me a bit of human contact...

MG: Were they good quality?

Matthew: Beautiful quality tapes, and I mean I have killed them. I would have played them twelve - fifteen times each... In terms of information problems... in my original newsletter the statement was that there would be three essays for this subject this semester... but in the same newsletter, about two or three pages later, there are two essay topics. You think to yourself, 'When is the third essay coming?'... And in fact some weeks after the first essay was due, I then get the second drop of things, which says,
'The information we gave you was wrong. At the time it went to press the course requirements had been changed, but the printers hadn’t been notified.'... It just didn’t hang for me. Like did these unknown faces with these unknown students really know what they were doing? I would have thought that a faculty running an external studies program ought to get their act right before they start putting things into press. I just had no idea how things worked. (Interview 2, 2.6.88).

Mary made the observation that impersonality is frequently a feature of the student experience of large modern tertiary institutions, by no means confined to off-campus study. Possibly her low expectation of face-to-face learning situations in the tertiary system accounts for her decision not to attend weekend schools. She considered the one such school which she did attend a waste of time. She acknowledged that in the situation of the off-campus student she lacked the ‘cues’ which would be necessary for a strategic approach, but these were relatively unimportant to her. A self-sufficient person who was neither credentialist nor competitive, she set her own learning goals and standards. Of the institution, she required that the courses have some intrinsic interest, be relevant to her work, and sufficiently well serviced to enable her to pass. Beyond a reasonable level of interaction such as prompt feedback on assignments, she did not expect or seek a personalised experience.

Mary: I really don’t know what any of them think, to be honest, the lecturers and markers, particularly.

MG: Sounds like you’re saying that’s not very important to you?

Mary: Well, um, it’s one of the hazards (in inverted commas,) of being a distance education student, I guess. Not realistic to expect to develop the sort of relationship you’d have if you were on campus, I think. You can to a certain extent, well, I could have gone to all the weekend schools, and obviously I would have got to know some of them a lot better that way, but as I say, I chose not to. It’s not a failing in the system, it’s me deciding not to.

MG: So that’s your realistic assessment of the system. You would see that as a negative?

Mary: Mm.

MG: And you balance that negative as against other advantages of studying this way?

Mary: Mm. When I was studying on campus, you didn’t really necessarily get to know the lecturers any better. You might, but certainly if they were just a lecturer and you were one of a hundred, they wouldn’t know who you were from a bar of soap. Maybe in the tute groups you’d get to know them, or prac. classes.
But at least you could observe them - make an assessment?

Oh, that’s right, you don’t get that opportunity...I still really don’t know what is - if I were to make a conscious decision, ‘Blow this, I just want to pass this course, what’s the minimum I can get away with?’ I really don’t know. Whereas perhaps if I were in more face-to-face contact and got to know them a bit better, I could probably judge that a bit more confidently.

So it’s not really so different from attending on campus in the conventional way?

No.

In terms of the quality of interactions and personalising the experience, it’s not that different?

Not really. If you were in a small group... ten or twenty, and you just had to get to know each other because you were that size, that’d be different I guess, but in my other experience I’ve been one of hundreds, so - . (Interview 4, 18.11.89).

When asked about her expectations of interactions with other students, Rosie expressed some of the essential difficulties of studying in relative social isolation:

What about associating with other people - other off-campus students?

Well, I’d like to meet a few students who are doing the same course. I think that’s really important. At least I found that was important with the Open University. I’m sure I wouldn’t have survived without somebody to ring up and say, ‘Gosh, are you finding this a bit difficult?’ And when they are, you know, that makes you feel a lot better. And then you can actually talk about it and get through with it. I mean that’s actually one thing that’s very difficult with off-campus students, isn’t it? Not having the continual contact with other people doing the same thing. Not being able to talk about it. I think that’s why I’ve dragged my husband into it, mainly, because you write your essay and then you need someone to read it out to. And obviously he can’t sit there and listen if he doesn’t know anything about it... I mean he likes to know basically what’s happening, so he can talk about it with me. I mean, you can’t get your ideas clicking over in your mind, I don’t think, without other people to talk to about it. Or at least it’s very difficult. (Interview 1, 10.2.88).

7.2.2 The content and methods of learning to be an off-campus student

A definition of the knowledge required to perform the role of student was offered to the author by an off-campus student interviewed in an earlier study (Kelly and Shapcott (Grace), 1987), who declared, 'Every student wants to know three things: what the
course is about; who you are dealing with; and what they want of you'. This definition of cultural knowledge is remarkably close to that given by Mortimer and Simmons (1978) who say that the content of learning to be a student consists of discovering what material to learn, how much to cooperate and/or compete with other students, and how to handle the faculty.

Such definitions represent a pragmatic student view of the role. In his critical study of the UK Open University, Harris (1987) formulates collective faculty perceptions. He proposes that the course materials and study guides are addressed to different images of the hypothetical student, which 'represent the necessary and permitted aspects of being a student in teaching at a distance':

... the student of the units or broadcasts is the ideal mature student, challenging, critical, with a certain independence, but still firmly contained within and committed to the framework of the pieces... The student of the supplementary materials is rather different. He or she has limited time and has to 'cut corners', he or she wants the core of the argument rather than having to read any unduly 'difficult' material, and he or she has a well-organised and rather calculating approach to assignments (Harris, 1987, 108).

7.2.2.1 The assignment as an arena for negotiation of meanings

The main, almost the exclusive arena for the negotiation of roles, definitions and meanings by off-campus students and faculty is the assessment system. The aspect of this system which offers most scope for two-way communication is the assignment, a task set by staff with which students must comply in order to succeed in their courses. The assignment is regarded as both a teaching and an assessment tool, but its role in assessment ensures a strong strategic element in students' approaches. This circumstance, combined with pressures on time, encourages instrumentalism in student approaches to assignment work. Studies in conventional tertiary settings (Becker et al., 1968; Miller and Parlett, 1974) and in the field of adult education (Gibbs et al., 1982a; Laurillard, 1979; Marton and Svensson, 1982; Marton et al., 1984; Morgan, 1984) have defined instrumentalism as a feature of the interaction between student orientations to study and the educational context or learning milieu rather than a psychological attribute.

Drawing on some of this material, Harris describes as instrumental the activities of students who:

... search materials for 'cues' about the contents of subsequent tests, sort
material according to whether it will or will not form the basis of an answer, and decode arguments as abstract recipes or tips to guide the writing of test answers (Harris, 1987, 110).

He reports finding varying degrees of instrumentalism in the course of his ethnographic research into the orientations of UK Open University students. Relating the students’ orientations to the teaching system, he reaches the conclusion that there is a convergence between student strategies and a system which employs the operationalisms of educational technology:

Both approaches have the effect of reducing academic materials to objects which are organised according to largely strategic considerations; both pursue an ‘efficient’ approach to their given ends; both operate with an indifference to anything that can not be operationalized as a means to those ends. Student instrumentalism as an orientation is thus a kind of deep conformity to the logic of the system after all (Harris, 1987, 118).

If Harris’s conclusion is correct, then in interactionist terms, instrumentalism can be seen as the outcome of a process of the construction of shared meanings in which both staff and students participate. The accounts of the seventeen students interviewed for this study provide some supporting evidence for this position. On the basis of their statements, some of the students could have been categorised in the first instance as superficial and strategic in their approach to learning. However, deeper understandings of their personal contexts, developed over a series of interviews, led to greater appreciation of the complexities of interactions between student orientations and the teaching system.

The instrumentalism expressed by Kaye (below) for instance, must be understood in the context of other things known about this student, which suggest that her recourse to the kinds of strategies mentioned by Harris can be interpreted as the response of someone who is disillusioned with the teaching system. The extract quoted illustrates the processes of interpretation, reality testing and the construction of meanings in response to seemingly contradictory staff behaviour. If, as Harris argues, instrumentalism represents a conformity to the logic of the system, it is ironic that the communicative processes could have led to the construction of shared meanings which appear to diverge so far from the ideals of education held by all parties.

Kaye: I was only getting C’s for my returned stuff. It didn’t seem to matter what I did I couldn’t - I think that what I did was fairly reasonable, in fact I was very tempted to have some of it re-marked by someone different, because a lot of the feedback I got from the person was simply that I wasn’t saying
- putting her ideas on paper. A couple of independent people read them and thought that they were really quite good assignments, but unfortunately, they didn’t mark them. I wasn’t looking for a re-mark, I was just looking for reassurance that they were good, or reasonable assignments, good content.

MG: ... yes I wondered whether you had any difficulty working out the basis of the assessment system, whether you felt you understood why you got certain marks or whether it seemed capricious. Are you left wondering what it is you have to do to hit the jackpot?

Kaye: There’s no real rhyme or reason. A few of us got together in desperation. I called the meeting in sheer desperation a week or so before the exam. We were talking generally about results, and I think nearly everyone I’ve spoken to said the same thing, that they slog their heart out for an assignment and get a C, then they’re rushed for time, whack through and do it without much thought and get a B.

MG: Not much incentive to slog your heart out?

Kaye: No, not at all. My friend Robert made the comment that he had bulldozed his way through Sociology and just found the most obscure books he could and put them in his bibliography and there was one marker who was really impressed by the obscurity of his reading and the width, but then the last lot he was sort of transparent from the front cover right through to the bibliography, and unfortunately he had a different marker, and she actually saw straight through it, and so he got a very bad mark for that one, but - it’s hard to say what they want. (Interview 4, 24.11.89).

Kaye’s failure to ‘make rhyme or reason’ of the assessment system clearly contributed to her sense of disillusionment. Mortimer and Simmons (1978, 433) comment that depending on the theoretical position adopted, the socialisation process in circumstances where rules are unclear and actors lack normative consensus can be regarded either positively or negatively. Role theorists tend to view this situation as dysfunctional for both the individual and the social group but from the interactionist perspective it may represent a positive opportunity for negotiation and agency.

Cathy indicated an awareness of the prevalence of the instrumental approach to learning, but nevertheless asserted a commitment to intrinsic personal meanings:

Cathy: I’m not in it to get passes, I’m in it to get my work - to do the best work that I can and read something and feel proud that I wrote it. (Interview 4, 20.11.89).
Matthew's high intrinsic academic interest in his courses was in conflict with an instrumentalism learned in previous experience of the education system. Preparation of the first assignment caused him to suffer extreme anxiety. He was attempting to operate in a frame of reference which was very different from that to which he was accustomed, but he had no reference group with which to test his interpretations of the communications received from the university, and he was unable to gauge the standard. However, as his subsequent comments reveal, he was very capable of using his relative social isolation to his personal advantage.

Matthew: I had a degree of anxiety and absolute frustration with the first essay. I felt totally alone, totally useless. I had to think in a way which I had not really had to think before in terms of writing prose as opposed to point forms... Mind you, I did write point forms. But I was totally immobilised for three weekends.

MG: You did that, but now you've got the feedback that you've got a high distinction - that's a certain indication?

Matthew: ... But at the time I was totally immobilised. It was dreadful. I was literally sitting here in a hot sweat, cold sweat, whatever, I can't remember, but I was so anxious. I felt so totally alone in the whole deal. I got out the counselling package and I thought, 'I can't ring these people, they'll think I'm stupid.'

MG: Even though they...

Matthew: Even though these people are set up to do it, I thought, 'Oh, that's for kids.' I suppose I was really too frightened to admit that I couldn't do it, I wasn't finding it easy to admit that to myself. Jenny and the kids went through hell, just through my frustration. Because I wasn't going to fail, I was going to give up rather than fail a first-year subject, but I just couldn't get going. There's a list of students for self-help, but I thought, 'No-one's rung me, how can I ring them?' To that stage I hadn't been allocated a tutor. Now I have been allocated a tutor because some poor guy had to mark the essay, so I gather he has been put as my tutor.

MG: Are you sure about that?

Matthew: No.

MG: He may be just...

Matthew: An essay marker? I was led to believe in the newsletter that they sent that you would be allocated a tutor with your first essay. 'He will mark this essay and subsequent essays.' So presumably this guy, well I don't even know, it could be female, I just assumed F. Marginson is a male, I don't know why... And then the little guy who signs the newsletters, I thought, 'He's got far too many students to worry about without me ringing him.'
felt very, very alone, and I just felt I had to plod on, and I did plod on, and I even got a cold sweat the day the assessment arrived back.

MG: How long did you have to wait?

Matthew: I suppose about three weeks, which I suppose isn't bad. And I got a page write-back...

MG: ...Tell me a bit more about how you went about writing the essay.

Matthew: I started writing it about seven times, trying to get a first paragraph. The thing that used to frustrate me is that technically I know how to write essays. I read the style guide... I knew what I wanted to write. I didn't know what they wanted me to write, and that's the big difference. I didn't know how deeply or in what sort of detail they wanted me to deal with things, and then, because there are two ways of looking at a two thousand word essay, you either cover one aspect really very closely or you take an overview... So I had no idea what that was about, I just plodded on... This room was literally littered with scribbled up bits of paper. I'd write a plan and then I'd think, 'How ridiculous' and chuck it away.

MG: ... You're your own critic as you write?

Matthew: Yes. In fact no-one has read my essays until my mother last weekend, because I sat her down and said, 'You're not interested in this, but you've got to read it.' My wife's totally uninterested in it. I've tried to badger my friends into reading bits, and they say, 'Oh, that's very nice, very nice'.

MG: So you haven't got anyone to share it with?

Matthew: There's no-one who can give me feedback. Even grammatically, I've had no-one to say, 'Hey, your grammar is wrong there, or there is a spelling mistake there. I got my typists at the rooms to do my first essay and they are sort of very dutiful, they said, 'That is very interesting.'... I found it very difficult to work out what sort of standard they wanted. Now obviously, getting a reasonable mark for it, I've hit the - I mean I've found the market for that particular essay. I don't know what the market is for the next essay. The thought went through my mind, 'Oh well, they have probably given me this for an encouragement award. This poor old external student doesn't know what it's all about, we'll just give him a mark so he'll keep going. (Interview 2, 2.6.88).

Matthew's case is especially interesting as an example of the negotiation between faculty and student of shared definitions of appropriate student behaviour. He deliberately resisted treating the assignment in a strategic or instrumental manner. This he found most difficult to do, not only because it meant changing his accustomed mode of operation, but also because the high marks he received for his early assignments
indicated to him that it was too easy to ‘con’ the faculty. His study of the Humanities was one arena in which Matthew was experimenting with change, almost to the point of conducting a self-initiated resocialisation. He insisted that he was studying for personal enrichment and enjoyment, but as soon as he became involved in the assessment system he found himself slipping into the competitive and strategic approach which he had used in his medical education and which he said now characterised his whole approach to life. The high distinction awarded his first essay only compounded his problems:

Matthew: I didn’t want it to be a challenge exercise. I wanted it to be an enjoyment exercise. So that not knowing how I was going to be doing, or what sort of level I was pitching myself at, having got my first essay, which was a major struggle, out of the way, and ended up getting a high mark for it, now I think I’d better get a high distinction for every essay I write.

MG: To get into medicine in the first place you must have gone through a very competitive system?

Matthew: Very.

MG: So that must become second nature to you in your approach to learning?

Matthew: Oh, that’s my approach to everything.

MG: So now you’re making a break, deliberately not doing that?

Matthew: Deliberately not doing stuff for the sake of achieving. ... This is a totally different frame of reference. I suppose that really is one of the basic things that this is all about. I’ve been through the medical sausage machine, I’ve come out a good sausage at the end, and I function in that same sort of straight-jacket, the same sort of sausage skin, all the way. There’s more to life than all of that, and it was a bit of a shock I think, early on, to find that the same sort of frame of reference could work. (Interview 2, 2.6.88).

Both within himself and in communications from the staff Matthew encountered both of the definitions of student identified by Harris (1987). That is, the ideal mature age intrinsically motivated learner and the strategic operator of ‘the system’. He had some difficulty, as did Kaye, in accepting such dualism or ambiguity, but his attitude to this situation was somewhat ambivalent. As he took care to point out, social isolation could be used to advantage:

Matthew: But having said all that, about my isolation and my work, it’s very comfortable being isolated. Very comfortable. Because you don’t have to confront anyone with real knowledge at a particular time, like in a tutorial setup and you’ve got a tutor saying, ‘What do you think about this?’ and you’ve not read it... Putting it another way, in your essay you could pick a particular topic and all you needed to read was the stuff around that
particular topic, and do it well, and you've conned yourself a pass in another essay... Isolation gives you a lot of protection from intellectual exposure. (Interview 2, 2.6.88).

7.2.2.2 Variations in the development of relationships

Although the demands of his busy medical practice virtually precluded attendance at weekend seminars, personal preference was also a factor in the privatisation of Matthew’s learning. However, by the end of 1988 he was moving closer to establishing a dialogue with the faculty. His need for a personalised learning situation is indicated by his intense interest in interpreting the scant information available to him about institutional personnel. In terms of the faculty’s role in promoting interaction, the communication with the most positive potential was a personalised hand-written letter. Unfortunately, this was offset by the lack of continuity of teacher-student relationships.

In spite of his desire to change his mode of operation, Matthew’s approach was highly strategic. He exercised deliberate choice and negotiated to remain in control not only of his slowly evolving relationship with the faculty but also of the definition of learning which would prevail. When eventually he was called at the campus, the purpose of his visit was not to participate in an organised seminar, but to reconnoitre on his own.

While it must be acknowledged that Matthew’s meaningful personal orientation to study contributed to the tension he experienced in relation to the issue of exposure, his remarks are nevertheless relevant in a more general way to the situation of off-campus students. The intensity of his personal meanings merely serves to heighten problems which are inherent in the situation.

Matthew: I actually wrote to the course leader, whatever his name is. I wanted another week extension and he gave me five weeks.

MG: Really!

Matthew: Yes, because he was going to Perth, so he was going to be away, so he said, 'Well, if you can get your essay in by the middle of December, that would be fine, because I won't be around to read it prior to that time. And I thought, 'Ah, that's just lovely'. And having got that extra five weeks, I thought, 'Well, if this guy's going to have to sit down and read it, I may as well make it as good as I possibly can, and I'll revamp a bit of the stuff that I'm unhappy with. So I thought that was - I felt by getting this hand-written letter back from this guy was a very personalised setup.

MG: He'd already marked some of your essays?

Matthew: No, this is the guy - I've never met this guy, but he writes very friendly
newsletters.

MG: Oh, yes, you mentioned this before.
Matthew: 'Welcome, dear students!' It's really quite - Oh, here's one: 'Dear friends' it starts, 'Greetings once again, I hope you are well and truly into the course and getting on well with it.' And you think to yourself, 'If there's five thousand copies of these it's a little bit ah -'. But when I actually got my own letter from this guy, he wrote in the same sort of way. Not quite as effusive as that, but there was some reality about it. In fact I'm quite keen to meet this guy because he features significantly in the whole of the rest of the second and third years' subjects for the major sequence. So, I thought, well, I might get to know this guy.

On the front of the assignment cover form, there's a space that says 'Tutor', which implies that you should know your tutor (assuming that someone has told you who your tutor is). But then you get a different bod each time. You think, 'Maybe it's been popped into someone else's pigeon hole'. There are all these ways of working out how these bods actually get your essays to read, but I'm sure it's just pot luck... I know that the guy who marked the first essay that got the high distinction - I've worked out he must be a reader or a senior member of the department. But I've never - the tutor that gave me my low credit, she could have been a passing phase who was just grabbed because I had a week's extension and she picked up the dregs at the end... It's probably like shuffling cards. I mean, I imagine they just pop them on piles.

I suppose the other thing I found interesting too, was that the professor has been on holidays for something like six months of the year. Not on holidays, he's been out of the university on sabbatical. Because when I went past his door, there was a beautifully constructed typed sign which said something like: 'The professor is away overseas and will not be back until March'. And I thought, 'Well, that's great, isn't it? Here's me slogging away at this course and I haven't even got an in-country professor!' Not that I necessarily need an in-country professor, but it's just one of those things. My contact with the professor is with The Age on Saturdays, where he writes an article. Whereas I was acutely aware of having a professor in Anatomy and Biochemistry and Pediatrics, acutely aware.

MG: What was your relationship with the professor in those circumstances?
Matthew: Someone who was intimately involved in my education. They knew who I
was. Sure I had tutors for everything, but there was still the prof... I suppose that’s how I see this man, being the name that gets put on all the course materials.

MG: It would be good to talk to him?

Matthew: At some stage.

MG: It seems to me that you need an engagement, an intellectual engagement with these people.

Matthew: Yes. Now maybe that’s my own fault, because I haven’t been to any of these non-compulsory, optional weekend seminars. I’ve deliberately shunned them. Maybe I won’t next year. That’s been my exposure problem because I’m managing alright on my own, why go and unearth my ignorance in the matter in a public forum? Which is part of why this correspondence stuff is so comfortable.

MG: Have you contemplated the possibility that your level of understanding is much higher than the others in the class?

Matthew: That would be fine. As long as I didn’t make a fool of myself. That’s the worry. It may be all these other people have far greater insights into all this than I’ve got. Because as we talked earlier, this is a different frame of reference for me...

At this point in the conversation I adopted the role of fellow student and tried to encourage him to communicate with the faculty by comparing his approach to learning with my own. This led him to make a very succinct statement defining his approach to formal study as the search for an integrating conceptual framework. He reiterated his claim to power and agency in the learning relationship, and then identified factors in interpersonal communication which are missing in communications over distance, and explained the inhibiting effects of their absence:

MG: It seems that you are thinking about a lot of things and that you are using your engagement with those courses at Deakin to help you to -

Matthew: Integrate the world.

MG: If I look back on my experience, various people have recognised that I had some interests and sort of encouraged me.

Matthew: Yes. I suppose that brings out to me an interesting point. For that you would have to have one-to-one contact in an on-campus set up.

MG: Yes.

Matthew: Whereas I don’t. The tutors certainly don’t know who I am. They may identify me on their computer as 88149---, but they have no idea what this guy is. Well, they can tell from my name that I’m male, and that’s about it. Really, it’s pretty anonymous, isn’t it?
MG: Yes. It doesn’t have to be. I mean, students do become known to the faculty.

Matthew: That’s why I thought I might go and see this tutor over the vacation, just to say, ‘Good day, this is me.’

MG: ... I know from my experience that lecturers and tutors do take an interest in students and follow them through.

Matthew: So I think this may well happen for me, but again it will be on my terms. Right? It will be on my terms. I will allow myself to expose myself to them when and where and with what sort of degree. Because I could have done it by going to the weekends, but I haven’t.

MG: People often wonder why off-campus students don’t take the initiative to make contact, ring up.

Matthew: Terrifying.

MG: Yes. Very exposing, isn’t it?

Matthew: Oh, yes.

MG: You don’t have the opportunity to sit at the back of the lecture and check them out.

Matthew: You can’t see the bod’s eyes, and if you can’t eyeball someone, my God, you are in trouble. Well, I’m in trouble if I can’t eyeball them... no non-verbal language, no facial expressions, no anything. (Interview 3. 18.11.88).

Mary’s experience highlights the politics of the relationship between students and faculty. Her two-year course consisted of two subject streams, in one of which she encountered difficulties in both years. The same lecturer conducted this course over four semesters. The facts that Mary made a point of reiterating that her criticisms applied to one stream only, and that she was able to check her interpretation of the reality of the situation with knowledgeable others in her personal context add credence to the interviewer’s belief that most of the burden of responsibility for this particular communications debacle lay with the lecturer rather than the student. Mary complained of grossly inadequate course materials; unavailability of the relevant staff member when she sought direction and guidance by telephone; inadequate or off-putting responses to her written requests for clarification; and extreme delay in the return of marked assignments. The culmination of two years of frustration came when she received the official statement of her semester’s results. For the subject in question, the statement recorded ‘I’ for ‘incomplete’ instead of the expected pass. A check with other students revealed that all had received the same disturbing result. The consensus of opinion was that the lecturer had failed to complete the assessment by the required date.
The consequence of inadequate course materials and student support was that in relation to that part of her course, Mary was deprived of much of the knowledge which was necessary for her success as a student. She described the experience of attempting to study under these conditions as ‘wandering around in the wasteland, wondering’, and complained that consequently her learning tasks were made unnecessarily arduous and time-consuming.

As a dedicated and conscientious teacher herself, Mary was critical of what she regarded as unprofessional behaviour, but apart from one oral comment to a senior member of the faculty, she chose not to make any formal complaint, although her remarks suggest that she may well have done so had she felt that her ability to gain credit for the course was at stake. Her choice not to take issue with the Institute is consistent with her general approach to this off-campus learning experience. Her sense of involvement with the Institute was minimal at the outset and remained so. However, the behaviour of the lecturer in question did nothing to enhance her sense of involvement. She never became, or sought to become more than a peripheral or marginal member of the institutional culture.

Cathy’s story is very different from that of either Matthew or Mary in that she progressed from being one of the most distant, in terms of cultural fit, to one of the most socially integrated of the seventeen students. She lived in Geelong, not far from Deakin University. Her choice of off-campus study was partly dictated by the practicalities of caring for a pre-school age child, but also partly a sign of a tentative approach to becoming a student. In her first year she attended weekend schools once or twice per semester for ‘a megadose of interaction’ and, in the course of progressive assessment by assignment, developed quite lively student-teacher relationships with some of the academic staff. The faculty member whose role in her student career at this stage appears to be the most significant was a male lecturer whom she considered very pedantic. She referred to him humorously as ‘good old apostrophe fanatic’ because he penalised her for errors of punctuation, and joked that making progress as a student meant ‘getting my apostrophes under control’.

By the second year Cathy had begun attending lectures and tutorials which were part of the on-campus program. She encountered more members of the academic staff, including two female tutors whom she described as ‘terrific’ and with whom she could identify. At first she could only attend in the evening when her husband was available to mind the children, but later when suitable childcare was available on campus she was able to take advantage of daytime classes as well. In the fourth interview she defined herself as, ‘still an off-campus student, but I just trundle along to the tutes’ and

155
described herself somewhat ironically as 'right in the thick of things now'. This involvement even extended to student activism: she took part in a demonstration on the campus to protest against the threatened closure of a newly established occasional childcare facility.

Cathy: I feel comfortable there, I don't feel, you know - I feel fairly comfortable now, I feel like I'm more in the swing of things... When I first started going out to uni., on campus, I was very, very wary of what I wore, and what I did, and, um, what makeup I put on and all of that, because I didn’t want to look over dressed or tarter up. And when I was doing the gender module in Sociology, I sort of thought, 'Hang on a sec., why do we - I don't know - delineate our femininity to such an extent that, you know, we've got to dress down or dress up? If this is what I've got on -' (cause I was thinking I would actually change, I mean if I'd been out all morning and I had high heels on), and I thought, 'Oh, my god, I've come in high heels, what will I do?' Then I thought, 'This is ridiculous, if I'm wearing my high heels, why should I change out of them just to do this?' So now I'm a bit more relaxed, and I just wear what I've got on... and I wear makeup if I've got it on, and if I haven't, then I don't. You know, I don't sort of get wound up trying to present the proper, female university image. Because I don't think there is one, anyway. But I was interested that one of the tutors always came looking very smart, always dressed very well, and I thought, 'Well, that's nice, she's not disguised, doesn't feel a need to disguise her femininity, or pretend she's not attractive, that's good.'

(Interview 4, 20.11.89).

By reflecting on her feelings about her presentation of self in the new context, Cathy provided an eloquent statement of the some of the processes of adaptation and identification involved in the passage from newcomer to insider.

7.2.3 Negotiation of definitions of knowledge and learning

Although framed in interactionist theory, Meacham's (1984) definition of success as a student as the construction of a view of the teaching-learning process which is congruent with that held by the institution appears to contain an assumption that staff hold a single, appropriate, non-negotiable definition of learning. Clearly, this is not the case. Harris (1987) discovered at least two rather contradictory assumptions about learning embedded in UK Open University pedagogy. In this and the following section, similarities and differences between staff and student definitions of knowledge and learning are compared with three theoretical models: discourse theory, perspective transformation and gender-constructed epistemologies.
7.2.3.1 Congruent definitions

Northedge (1987; 1988) argues that discourse theory can profitably be applied to the production of course materials for off-campus students, and that the task of the student can be defined in terms of this theory as learning to make 'meaning' happen. Academic discourses exist as dynamic, historical processes which carry social power, and becoming a student in a particular discipline is a process of initiation into an academic discourse. The content of such learning includes the ability to read, hear and understand the discourse; and to be able to speak or write arguments which carry weight in the discourse. Engaging in a discourse involves two important skills, framing and linear processing, which are in tension. Conceptualised in this way, reading a text is perceived as a hermeneutic process involving movement between the frame and that part of the discourse represented by a particular text. Describing the experience of new Open University students as 'culture shock', Northedge explains that:

A system of discourse involves concepts, ideas and conventions of explanation. These accumulate around any collective 'expert' analysis of a subject, be it gardening, football tactics, physics or literary criticism. In every such 'expert' discourse the newcomer is likely to be baffled as to why particular issues are the focus of debate, why one factor is seen to be related to another, why a distinction is made here and why a causal connection is assumed there. Ironically, much of what is absolutely central is often missing from the discussion, precisely because it is so fundamental that 'insiders' to the discourse take it for granted (Northedge, 1987, 149).

Brian's accounts of his learning process exemplify the outsider's encounter with an unfamiliar discourse. His efforts to make meaning amounted to a kind of decoding. His initial dismay when confronted with the vocabulary of the discourse eventually gave way to a sense of mastery as he came to construct a definition of the learning process which was congruent with that implicit in the content and conduct of the course. He was assisted by the fact that he had access to an interpreter in the form of a tutor, and by his own ability to engage in framing ('to get an overview') as well as linear processing. He even consciously conceptualised the process as one of induction ('I think you've got to look at it from the novice's point of view') a process which he was able to observe happening in his own teaching. In a brief aside about his conversations with teaching colleagues in the car pool ('"paradigm" got used there for a while') he further indicated that he needed to make links between the new discourse and other frames of reference. In Brian's case this was particularly important, because of the relevance of the subject, Educational Administration, to his professional life.
MG: Can you tell me a bit more about the tutorials? You've been to one or two, I think?

Brian: Yes, that's right. I've found them valuable. Mainly they give you a direction of where you are going. You could ask questions like, 'All this stuff, is it important?... You know, when you've got a list of readings that thick, forty odd readings, it's nice to know that you need to read seven or eight key ones and where they all fit in with different, ah, where the authors fit in and where their arguments are going. To get an overview. Because some of these articles are ten or twelve pages long, and it's all sort of jargon.

MG: Now that you've nearly completed the course, can you see how the ideas come together?

Brian: I can see the whole... When I first looked at it there was just a whole series of sub-headings and topics that you were going to be looking at through the reading guides, and it didn't make much sense. But now, as I was saying before, the idea is that you are to look at things in an overall perspective more so than a very narrow way... When you first start this book here, that was prescribed as a text, - you look at this and it's unbelievable, some of it. The first paragraph I read - the first sentence - there were four words I couldn't understand. You know, 'paradigm' and all this sort of stuff...

MG: And did you find yourself starting to use the jargon in your essays?

Brian: Yes I used it in the essay, it was good. I go to work in a car pool, and paradigm got used there for a while. I thought, 'I'll test this one out!'

MG: What will be different about your approach to next semester's work?

Brian: I'll be looking for an overview much earlier on. Those first weeks were very hard. Now I've got an idea of where the faculty are heading and what their theories are, and what sort of paradigm, if you like, they are pushing. Now that means I will be able to home in on the terms and their ideas much more quickly... I will get an idea about the course but I won't have to put so much effort into reading it word for word, paragraph by paragraph... Even just knowing the terms... You go through it more confidently with this prior knowledge.

MG: If you hadn't had the tutorial, you could have floundered around for -

Brian: Donkey's ages. Yes, I'm sure. As I say, it's having an overview... I think you've got to look at it from the novice's point of view. We haven't got the idea of an overview. I find this myself with teaching Physics to kids. Where I know where this links to that, students just know it from day to day. They can't make links that they don't know about. That's in the
future. You know, as a student of Educational Administration, I can’t either. (Interview 2, 28.6.88).

7.2.3.2 Disillusionment

The extract below is quoted as an illustrative example of the construction of a definition of the reality of a learning situation which was considerably at variance with the ideals espoused by both student and, presumably, higher education institutions.

Kaye’s evaluation of the situation should be considered in the context of influences such as: an original underestimation of her own intellectual ability and associated high expectations of the institution; a perception, based on the feedback she received on her assignments, that expressions of original ideas drawn from life experience were unacceptable in ‘academic’ discourse; and the discovery that she could gain credit for units of study with a bare minimum of effort:

Kaye: I suppose academically I’ve found my identity in a way, and that’s helped with my inner confidence. I suppose I feel very scathing about the degree, too. I feel let down and disappointed. Because I feel that for the little bit of work I’m doing, I’m getting through, and it’s just shot the entire credibility of the degree course right to - but that’s because of the way I’m treating it. I don’t, I really don’t believe someone like me should be passing.

MG: ... Once you overcame the initial hesitation and got into the work, it failed to engage you?

Kaye: Mm.

MG: Like the child you mentioned just now, who had been to an interesting kindergarten and found first year at school a bore?

Kaye: Mm, yair, you’re probably right. I hadn’t thought of it that way. You’ve probably just about hit the nail on the head because I was really apprehensive because I didn’t think I could cope, then I started coping, and now it’s just - I’ll be honest, apart from the returned stuff that I had to do, when I’d look at a few books, I’d do the assignment in half a day or an afternoon or an evening or whatever... The study for these exams I did two days before the exam. The entire study. I hadn’t even looked at the notes or books before that. I’m being absolutely honest. I had not looked at the books. But I - you can imagine how I feel. Doing that and getting Bs. That’s a good admission, isn’t it?

MG: Mm.

Kaye: That’s pretty sad, really, yair. That’s what I mean, I’d get an A if the
subject was how little you can do to get a pass. I just chose three topics for the exam on Wednesday this week, and I studied them. Carried that knowledge to the exam yesterday, and that’s all over. So I would say that I’d probably get a B or a C for it. (Interview 4, 24.11.89).

It is not the researcher’s intention to assess the validity of Kaye’s perceptions of the academic quality of her degree course, which would require a program evaluation which is beyond the scope of this study. It is argued, however, that her very frustration with this situation, taken together with the deep integrity of her search for meaning in other facets of her life, indicates that the strategies she adopted cannot be ascribed entirely to inherent personality factors. In terms of the Meacham’s (1984) interactionist concept of the learning milieu, it is noteworthy that Kaye did not consider the definition of a learning experience a matter for open negotiation with the Institute.

7.2.3.3 Maintaining distance

In Matthew’s learning agenda, the role of the university was to provide an integrative philosophical framework for his intellectual explorations. His hesitancy in engaging with the faculty can be explained in part by his insecurity as he moved into an unfamiliar paradigm, and partly by his perception that there were philosophical contradictions between the faculty’s theory and practice. As an undergraduate student still near the beginning of his course, he felt ill-prepared to mount a challenge on such an issue. Once again, a critical and potentially challenging student perception was not communicated to the faculty.

MG: You said that you want more interaction about essay writing, you also obviously would like to brainstorm with people.

Matthew: Yes, I’d love to. That’s not something which you could do with scientifically based things. The facts are either there, or they’re not there.

MG: Not a case of tossing ideas around?

Matthew: I don’t think so... You either have a set of symptoms, which would then put you onto a disease process, and then you just went looking to tick off the lists of other symptoms that, say, a malfunctioning thyroid gland would have... you know, there’s not a lot of to-ing and fro-ing. You’ve either got them, or you haven’t got them.

MG: You’ve talked about scientific discipline and mind set...

Matthew: Yes.

MG: Can you talk about the experience of stepping from one world to another... because actually I think what you’re talking about - it’s bigger than a set of techniques, isn’t it?
Matthew: Yes.
MG: ... It's really a way of looking at the world?
Matthew: Yes, you're right. I really don't believe in the scientific method.
MG: I'm interested in that, because that's what my work has been about.
Matthew: How do you mean?
MG: Well, getting into the philosophy of what's called qualitative research... but I approached it from another way, because when I started to do social science research, I hadn't been trained as a scientist.
Matthew: You see, social science is bullshit.
MG: Yes! Do you mean it's not a science?
Matthew: No!
MG: A lot of social scientists try to make it so.
Matthew: I can't even see why they would want to.
MG: It's a big, um, it's a big issue.
Matthew: Oh, it's obviously an enormous issue for them, because they are so inculcated with um, technocratic and mechanisation and computerisation - it's the way our whole world functions at the moment. I think it's almost obscene! To have, um, pure philosophical creative thought melted down to some sort of pseudo science, you know. thesis, hypothesis, trial, results, conclusion.
MG: Yes, well, objectivity is the big philosophical issue. Whether you can have objective knowledge in this field.
Matthew: I think objectivity is the most horrible thing out! That's what I want to escape from! I don't know whether you recall, that was one of the things that really horrified me in the first part of the course. I was just horrified that religion could be studied as a scientific matter, I was horrified that they even felt that that was important to actually... and I thought to myself, 'What have I come to? I'm wanting to escape this, and look what they want me to do!'... It really saddens me, to have the philosophic thinking made kosher, to tie it up with the scientific method... (Interview 4, 15.11.89).

7.2.3.4 The influence of gender on students' definitions of knowing and learning

Reporting extensive field research which included in-depth interviews with 135 women from various 'walks of life', Belenky and colleagues (1986) theorise women's epistemology in terms of a metaphor of voice and silence, which they locate within the larger context of existing feminist theory on the silence and invisibility of women. Five perspectives from which women view reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge and authority are presented as stages in a developmental progress from
silence and disempowerment through recognition and validation of the self or inner voice to a mature position in which knowledge is understood as a social construction in which the individual woman can participate.

The themes of silence, listening and voice are evident in my study, both in the substantive data and in the methodology, which is essentially a matter of listening. Some of the nine women interviewed discussed the perceived advantages of academic achievement in terms of gaining the confidence to speak out: 'I used to sit there and say nothing once' (Ingrid, Interview 3); 'I've always been afraid of people and afraid of speaking my mind (Diane, Interview 3). The interview transcripts yield examples of the women being self-conscious, modest, or apologetic about talking too much, or inconsequentially: 'I've just waffled on for half a tape about absolutely nothing'. (Cathy, Interview 1). 'I'd like to help if I can be of any use, but I doubt if I would be of any interest to you.' (Alice, 'phone conversation, January, 1988).

The metaphor of voice and silence is most clearly exemplified by Betty, a forty-five year old married woman who had two grown children, managed a household and pursued a nursing career. It has been mentioned (6.2.1.2) that in the second interview she validated my intuitive insight that she had internalised a belief system that her ideas were wrong or not worthwhile. Her return to study was accompanied by a tension created by the conflict between this inhibiting belief and convictions generated by her experience as woman, mother and nurse. In terms of the five epistemological perspectives defined by Belenky and colleagues (1986), Betty can be categorised as a 'received' knower, one who respects the authority of knowledge offered by others, but who has little confidence in her own ability to speak. Her remarks suggest that she defined the kind of learning required in higher education as receiving and returning the words of others. I consider it significant that she mentioned more than once that her main difficulty in writing essays was finding enough words.

There is some evidence in the transcripts that at first Betty treated the interview as analogous to an assessment situation. Her hesitant responses to questions such as, 'What, in your view, is the aim of the course you are studying?', suggest that she was experiencing some anxiety as to whether she could provide the 'right' answers for this 'expert' from the university. When the conversation turned to the subject of nursing, however, her manner was more relaxed, and words flowed more easily. She had extensive experience of both hospital-based and community-based nursing. She had thought deeply about the subject and was very concerned about changes taking place in the profession. By patient listening, feeding back my understandings and demonstrating that I recognised that she had good ideas and that I wanted to hear them, I attempted to
validate Betty’s knowledge, but it was not until the latter part of the third interview that she shared her thoughts in a relaxed and confident way.

Betty’s fears about expressing her ideas indicate that in certain circumstances she expected to be ignored, rejected or ridiculed. As mentioned above (6.2.1.2), such inhibitions can be understood as part of a more general pattern of socially constructed silence. Sociolinguistic analysis reveals gender differences in conversational patterns such as that women talk less in mixed groups and are interrupted more often (Belenky et al., 1986; Spender, 1980).

Another theme which emerges when the template of gender is placed over the interview data is the relative epistemological value of personal experience. Belenky et al. observe that it is a common conviction among women, especially those whom they categorise as ‘subjectivist’ or ‘connected’ knowers, that ‘the most trustworthy knowledge comes from personal experience rather than the pronouncements of authorities’ (1986, 112). All of the women interviewed had extensive experiential knowledge, that is, beliefs, values and attitudes based on personal experience and mediated by culture. Some perceived a gap between the body of ‘received’ knowledge transmitted in the formal education system and other bodies of knowledge which they attributed to experience. This gap tends to silence such students, since it appears to them that their experiential knowledge has no currency in the authoritative discourses of formal education.

Kaye’s disenchantment with the learning experience offered by the Institute, which has been mentioned above, can be understood as a perception of this gap. The following transcript shows that while she appeared to accept an alternative interpretation of markers’ comments, she nevertheless reiterated her interpretation of the reality of the situation, one which was not acceptable in her definition of education. Kaye’s use of the word ‘stifling’ is noteworthy in view of the fact that she mentioned more than once that she felt claustrophobic in the Institute’s buildings. She was not comfortable in a place where she could not speak in her authentic voice.

Kaye: I’m working out the systems of, um, scan reading and using indexes and things, I’m getting into the habit of doing that, I like to have every book I’ve got on the topic just opened on the appropriate page and just whip through and do a re-hash. But it’s sort of a bit nonplussing to me to think that all I am doing with my assignments is rehashing other people’s work. I find that really cheating. And stifling. And occasionally when you’re game to express your opinion, you have a big question mark put on it: ‘Is this your opinion? Is this your opinion?’ Or, ‘Can you back this up?’ Or,
Where did you find this? So it’s hard. I’m looking forward to getting on to subjects where you can express an opinion, if there’s such a subject.

MG: Mm. It might be worth talking about that to someone at the Institute, I think. I would think it’s not so much a matter of expressing opinions as convincing them that you can support them.

Kaye: Yair, I think you’re right, in fact I’m sure you are. I was really pleased at one stage, I put in some essay to do with education - ’cause I’ve taught in both systems - I said that my personal experience had revealed such and such, and that was accepted, so I was really pleased. That was the first time an opinion or a thought or a feeling that I’d expressed had been accepted. But maybe it was just the marker I had. I think it’s a bit sad - we all end up writing exactly what we think they want to hear, which is really sad. That’s not really education.

MG: ... How do you feel, then, - what are your thoughts and feelings about putting in so much time over a long period of six years?

Kaye: Oh, I’ve said this before to you, it’s a means to an end. I need the piece of paper to do something. (Interview 4, 24.11.89).

Others of the women students had better experiences in terms of the integration of their experiential knowledge base with the academic study in which they were engaged. Both Ingrid and Alice studied an interdisciplinary course called ‘Australian City’ as their introduction to Deakin University, and both recounted their enjoyment of the task set for the first assignment, which invited them to study and write about their home locality. In their literature courses Alice and Cathy undertook creative writing exercises which encouraged the expression of original ideas drawn from personal experience. They spoke about these tasks with evident pleasure and interest.

7.2.4 The world of the student

Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe social life as consisting of multiple realities, or finite provinces of meaning, of which the reality of the world of everyday life is paramount. In this thesis the experience of distance education is construed as an encounter between two provinces of meaning, or realities: the student’s ‘home’ or ‘personal’ context, and that of the institutional culture. In the foregoing sections, some estimation of the extent to which students become integrated in the institutional culture is made. In actuality, these students received course materials and other emanations of the institutional culture into their homes via the postal and telecommunications services, and the home was the place where they did most of their study. In this section, the ‘home’ context is presented as the student’s paramount reality, into which the reality of the institutional culture is received and possibly integrated.
Integration of the institutional reality incorporated in the role of student requires adjustments in the 'home' context, the main physical foci of which are the home itself and the place of work. Two important arenas in which the demands of the two realities must be negotiated are the management of time and the maintenance of significant relationships. The issue of time management has been mentioned above in the context of the phenomenon of withdrawal, as has the increased strain on marital relationships following the assumption of the role of student by one partner. Both phenomena are familiar to distance educators (Heinze, 1983; Kirk, 1977; Nicholson, 1977). Stress on parenting roles, and therefore by implication on children, is also a significant element in the world of the adult student.

7.2.4.1 Negotiating realities

Off-campus students' ability to maintain their motivation over the considerable time required to complete a course of study depends partly on successful negotiation of realities, since the maintenance of a certain subjective reality in relative isolation from the context in which that reality has meaning requires negotiation with others in the 'home' context. The failure or inability of significant people in the 'home' context to share or legitimate the other reality contributes to the difficulty of the task of maintaining such a reality. Mary enjoyed renegotiating with her ex-students their definitions of her reality, was supported by the acceptance of her peers, but found that others were less able to validate her new role. (Mary lived in Geelong and visited the Deakin campus on occasion):

Mary: I had to laugh, I went out to Deakin to get a book and I ran into, just accidentally, three of four ex-students from the school I'm at.

MG: Oh, did you?

Mary: 'What are you doing here? Oh, are you doing a course?' The three of them that I ran into, their reaction was all the same. Apparently they don't think that teachers do any more study or learn any more. 'What are you doing here? Are you doing a course?!!' That sort of thing, funny... 'Oh, fancy you learning something!' But I think in the end they were impressed, you know, that they thought it was probably a good thing. But it hadn't entered their minds that you could actually want to do a bit more learning or go off into another area or feel that you need to update or something... It's been interesting - the reaction of my peers has been, well, it's just someone doing a course, so what? That's quite normal, sort of thing. They don't bat an eyelid. But others outside the school system, or people a lot younger, they seem quite taken aback that you would even consider it.

MG: ...so your work context is one in which this is par for the course, but you are aware that in other social contexts it seems quite strange and different?
Mary: I know my Saturday afternoon tennis group that I play with, they just look at me and shake their heads in amazement if I say, 'Look, I can't come down the pub tonight, I really have to try to finish this assignment off.' You know, 'What are you doing that for? That's pretty silly!' - sort of thing. Or they think, 'Haven't you got something better to do with your time?' or, you know, 'What a spoil sport you are', or something along those lines.

MG: Would it be difficult if you didn't have the work context where there is understanding and appreciation of what you are doing? Can you imagine how that would be?

Mary: Yes, I guess that is fairly supportive, now that you mention it, because a lot of people outside just can't understand why I would want to do it, or even have any sense of how demanding it might be time-wise. They could perhaps understand that I need to put a bit of time into it, but not as much as is needed. They don't seem to appreciate that well. You know my mum is a classic example. She couldn't understand (a) why I wanted to do it (until I explained it to her a little bit), and (b) she couldn't understand how it could possibly take so much time. So I guess that unless you are in the hurly-burly of it all the time, you don't appreciate, I guess, the demands that it makes.

MG: ...I think it would be hard if you didn't have an alternative context, to maintain, perhaps, your motivation if everyone around you...

Mary: Yes, I can see if you were just a mum at home and no one else studying around you, that it would be quite difficult. I guess I am lucky there again.

(Interview 2, 29.6.88).

7.2.4.2 Making adjustments

The pressures of competing demands on available time was a dominant feature in the lives of all the students. As mentioned in 7.1.1 the teachers all spoke of extra pressures created by changes in their professional contexts. Mary learned to adjust her expectations of herself and her preferred way of working, which was thorough and painstaking, to the exigencies of her situation and the demands of the Institution's teaching system.

Mary: It has been very time consuming and maybe I take a bit longer to do things or think about things than perhaps I should. I should be more - just get in there and do it and be done with it. Where it has taken me two or three days to do things, when I look at it I think, 'Well, golly, fancy taking all that time to do that.' But I suppose I will have to learn to be a bit more
pragmatic and just get in there and do it. Rather than trying to think of every possible angle and not be satisfied, or am I a bit too hard to satisfy perhaps... I think I am learning just to get in there and do it. It's never going to be perfection, so give it your best shot, but don't overdo it, because you have other commitments and other things to do.

MG: Could you tell me a bit more about how you work that?

Mary: Well I suppose I am fortunate in that I can just shut the doors and windows and take the phone off the hook, and have a whole day without any distractions from anybody to just work at it. Maybe that's why I spend a bit more time on it than I really should, because other people have kids running around or someone else calling on their time. But I found it hard, I really need to have three or four hours at a time. It takes me half an hour to sort of get going.

MG: Right.

Mary: So I need to have those sort of slots of time to work at it. I found - you see school is very demanding too, all these changes with the VCE and these new courses and things you are supposed to read and curriculum meetings and things after school within the region about your subject areas, and it just seems never to stop. Some of it is a matter of just wanting to keep going, you know, I would rather just stop and sit down and be quiet for a while. Or go off and do something completely divorced from work. You never seem to stop doing some sort of school work, whether it's this course, or off to meetings, or just corrections for school, or whatever it happens to be. So I found it very demanding that way. I really have to make myself stop or go out and play tennis or go shopping or out to dinner or something, because you could just work at it the whole time. (Interview 2, 28.6.88).

Parenting is a very important part of the world of most adult students. The decision to interview students at home was a fruitful one for many reasons, not least of which was the fact that it ensured that sacrifices which children are asked to make in order that their parents can pursue part-time study could not be overlooked. Children were present, or waiting off-stage in other parts of the house, during many of the interviews. Some of the tape recordings are punctuated frequently with sounds from children and interruptions for parental aside's addressed to them. Usually the children complied without complaint with the expectation that the interviewer's claim to their parent's time and attention must be respected, but there was an implicit acceptance of a bargain in this compliance. Recognising their generosity and relative lack of negotiating power, I tried to be alert and accommodating to their inevitable signals that the interview had continued long enough.
Like Mary, Dave had to make adjustments between the demands of his employment and those of the off-campus course, which were greater than he had expected, but probably the most painful adjustment was the sacrifice of time spent with his three young sons:

MG: You knew what you were letting yourself in for?

Dave: I thought I did. Perhaps I didn’t understand it as fully as I thought I did... It’s more work than I even thought it was going to be. Well, I’m finding it more difficult, with time constraints and all that sort of stuff as well.

MG: After our first interview I decided that you are a man who enjoys your work and family and you sort of - you like having fun.

Dave: Oh yes, I certainly do. And well, the amount of work I am putting into this at the moment, I’m probably not putting enough into the course because it does infringe into my time with my sons and there are times when I enjoy going down to the pub with a few mates... Work is taking a lot of my time. This is probably the worst time of year for me as far as work goes... and this course has suffered a bit because work has taken over. But then again, so have the boys... leaving for work... sometimes it’s six, sometimes it’s seven o’clock or six-thirty in the morning and coming home about six-thirty, seven o’clock at night. Often the boys just get up and say ‘Good day’ just as I’m leaving and then kiss me when I get home because they are in bed. Sometimes I don’t get a chance to read them a story, so they’re missing out. And when I come home from work the last thing I want to do is sit down and do four hours’ study... Then on the weekends for a while there I was really motivated and the boys were growling at me because I was sitting here reading a couple of hundred pages of Admin... just now I’m spending more time with the boys and probably I’m not applying myself as much... I was reading myself to sleep some nights - Admin, computers...

Some people probably who are a lot more academically oriented than myself might not be having problems, but they might be able to do half the study load and get better results. That’s fine, I think most people who are doing these courses are just like me, you know, battling, battlers who are doing their job and haven’t really got five hours a day they can really spend on study, and probably need to spend that long. The middle of the road intelligence type people. I don’t know. (Interview 2, 28.5.88).

Apart from negotiating adjustments with her husband and children, Cathy’s growing identification with the university was accompanied by disengagement from some
established activities, and attempts to make connections between the two realities. Such adaptations were more than a simple matter of time management; exposure to critical social analysis contributed to attitudinal changes. In the final interview, at the end of her second year of study, she stressed that it was essential to maintain a balance between home and university, and some of her concern about this is expressed in the following transcript.

Cathy: Lots of things have changed. Priorities change. Housework’s never been the highest priority with me, now it’s the lowest priority. The garden is slightly under housework, because I’m a hopeless gardener... but you know, by the time the assignment’s handed in it looks like we live in a cave, because nothing happens... so my life’s changed, but I’m very happy with it. I’m having a good time, and Bill is coping very well with it. He gets a bit persnickety when he hasn’t any shirts to wear. He says, ‘I have sixteen shirts, why aren’t there any in the wardrobe?’ ‘Oh, well, I’ll just iron one, which one would you like?’ He hates having to wait in the morning for his shirt to be ironed, which doesn’t happen very often, I must admit. But yair, that’s about the only whinge I’ve had. He’s still very supportive. He gets a bit cross when I leave my assignment to the last minute, because he’s very organised...

My kids are really good too. They’re very supportive. They know if I go and shut myself in the study that, you know, it’s not a good idea to come and tell me about every ant that they see outside or something. I don’t take advantage of that generally, I very rarely study at the weekend, or when they’re around, but when I do, I explain to them that I’ve really got to do this, and they’ll play outside or something. That’s not a problem...

And Jan, she looked after my daughter when I was out at the tutorial, boy, did she get an earful when I came back, ‘Oh, look, we talked about this today, now what do you think are the top fourteen crimes in Australia? Come on now, I’m just interested to know what you think.’ ‘Cause you come back all fired up with new ideas and that, and you need somebody to sort of - I need someone to throw them at. And she copped some of it, actually...

MG: Do you still go along to help in the school library?

Cathy: Not as much, no. I’ve dropped out of that a little bit, I don’t find I have the time. In between going to aerobics and trying to get to tutorials, writing essays and running the kids backwards and forwards to ballet and all of that, I need a sort of fun morning at home, just to clean floors and do all those basic sort of things. And also the librarian there started to
really irritate me. He’s a real chauvinist, and I couldn’t handle it. I kept telling him he was reading the wrong books to the children, so I thought maybe I should take a lower profile. It used to depress me. He was in charge of all the buying, and he hadn’t even read any of those books on sexism in children’s literature...

MG: So uni. is one of the many contexts that you’ll move in and out of. One of the roles that you play?

Cathy: That’s for sure. It’s trying to put all these roles together with gello that’s the tricky bit, isn’t it? Trying to make them all sort of workable. Together. (Interview 4, 20.11.89).

During the conversation of which the extract above was a part, I told Cathy that she was like some other women I had interviewed in several ways: return to study was motivated by a need to prove that she could succeed academically; a need for a measure of achievement; and a desire to return to a subject area which she had enjoyed in the past. I suggested that by the second year, she was moving beyond these preoccupations into an exploration of disciplines which were new to her. Her response to this analysis indicates conscious control over the degree of her identification with the academic culture. At that stage she did not aspire to metamorphosis:

Cathy: Yes, I think that’s probably true. I think I’m still in between phases. I still need, um, to do the work and think, ‘Well, I’m not stupid after all, because I’ve done this essay and I’ve got a reasonably good mark for it. I must have some modicum of intelligence after all.’ But something that I’ve come to see that’s very important to me is that I’m definitely one of these people who has to have a balance in their life. I could never become a scholar, an academic, as a central, you know, most important part of my life. After I’ve finished an assignment, it’s a real challenge to get that assignment done, I did it, good, now I can go and visit my friends, now I can take my kids to the park... I need to have that balance all the time. (Interview 4, 20.11.89).

With respect to the adjustments made between spouses when the wife took up study, the kind of inconsistency evident in Cathy’s comments that her husband was supportive and he expected that freshly ironed shirts would continue to be provided each morning was evident in the accounts of several of the married women interviewed. I formed the opinion that assertions by married women that their husband was supportive of their study should be interpreted with some caution. When such assertions were accompanied by the narration of instances of the male chauvinism of other women’s husbands or of men in general, one might assume the presence of a contradictory
message obliquely conveyed. Reporting interviews with UK Open University women graduates, Swarbrick reaches a similar conclusion:

All the graduates, for instance, claimed either moderate or great interest and support from their husbands. Yet from their own evidence it was clear that the level and kind of support varied greatly. Probing revealed a range of expectations from very modest: 'He didn't mind me doing it. It didn't make much difference to him really. He isn't very domesticated' to very high (Swarbrick, 1978a, 63).

7.2.4.3 Self-initiated personal learning agendas

In the sense that learning is a life-long activity which has many components, both within and outside of formal education settings, it can be said that this research produced evidence that off-campus study provided an arena in which the people interviewed worked out idiosyncratic learning agendas which had meaning in terms of personal development. It is not suggested that they were necessarily fully aware of their own agendas at the level of the discursive consciousness but rather that in some measure their motivations resided in the subconscious. The theme of personal growth is paramount in Diane's reflections in the third interview, which took place toward the end of the 1988 academic year:

MG: I just want you to reflect on the year a bit now that you're nearly at the end of it. Were the courses what you expected?

Diane: Yes, I guess. It's hard to remember right back to when I didn't know anything about it. It just seems like it's been three years, it doesn't seem like nine months. I mean going from a full-time housewife to this, it's like a lifetime ago. And I could never go back to being a full-time housewife again. It's just like a lifetime ago. It's sort of like I expected it to be, but I'm finding it a lot easier than I thought I would find it. You remember how apprehensive I was?

MG: Yes!

Diane: Yes, so I'm finding it a lot easier.

MG: I'm getting that from other women too, they've under-estimated themselves.

Diane: Right. Or over-estimated

MG: Over-estimated the standard?

Diane: Of the institution that you've never been able to go to before. The standard and the accessibility. I think Gippsland Institute does do a good job with its external students. They are very accessible. Well, I've heard criticisms of other courses, but in my School they are very good. I mean, they give you private 'phone numbers of the highest of the high, and you just ring
through and approach them. I mean, I got an assignment mark I was
disguised with. It was the Law subject. I got a ‘D’. I was absolutely
furious. He handed it out in class and I looked at it and I stormed out and
I said, ‘Have you read this?’ He said, ‘No’. I said, ‘You read this, I
worked hard on this.’ And he read it and rang me up and said, ‘This is
clearly better than a ‘D’, I understand why you were so cross. I think it’s a
‘C’.’ And I said, ‘Well, I knew you couldn’t give me any more than a ‘C’.
You can hardly give me a ‘B’ if one of your markers has given it a ‘D’.
And then he went and told me places where I could have made it better
and everything.

I mean I am looking at this woman storming down this great big lecture
room, hundreds of people, saying, ‘Did you read this paper?’! I sat in the
Supreme Court all day researching the case. I went in there - ‘Excuse me,
I want to go and look’. No-one of the public had ever come in and asked
them to do this before, but I said to myself, ‘Why shouldn’t I? This is a
public library and I want to read this Law case’. You know? It was 1892
in some English court and everything, and they unlocked this dusty old
law court thing, and I sat in the Law library all day. I read this case, I
researched, I put so much work into it, and I got a bloody ‘D’! I was
furious, so furious. He completely didn’t - he just didn’t understand what I
was saying.

But anyway, that was good. I mean I couldn’t believe I was doing that. So
obviously I’m a lot stronger than I thought I was. I could become a
menace to society!

... I’m really pleased with this year, I’ve really sort of broken out. I’ve
always been afraid of people and afraid of speaking my mind. My father
always used to say to me, ‘Don’t argue with your elders’, and all this sort
of thing. And now I’m arguing with them!

MG: That’s another thing I’m getting from women. Making the break and
testing themselves by going back to study gives them the confidence to
express their opinions.

Diane: Well, before you do that, you think you’re sub-human. You do! Because
everybody’s out there doing a worthwhile job and you’re just sitting at
home doing a bit of ironing or something. Until you get out there and you
realise, ‘Wait a minute, they’re not much better than I am. In fact, I’m
better than she is.’ And then you think, ‘Why should I let them get away

172
with it? It's been a great year. Even if I never go - even if I don't do any more study beyond tomorrow, it would be all worthwhile because it's been a great year for me. I'm really pleased.

MG: So am I.

Diane: Oh good! Are all the other ladies like this? Are they all becoming menaces to society as well? (Interview 3, 15.10.88).

Kay's ambivalence about taking up formal study can be understood partly in terms of its relationship to her personal search for identity, a private learning agenda which she was pursuing at the same time that she was enrolled with the Institute. In the first interview Kaye revealed that she was an adopted child, and that she had begun the search for her biological parents. She returned to the subject in subsequent interviews, sharing that she had traced her father, by then deceased. In view of her expressed belief that she was 'not the academic type', it was interesting to hear that both her father and grandfather had distinguished scholastic careers. In the fourth interview Kaye reported excitedly that she had made contact with a living relative, a half-sister.

The following extract documents a significant moment in the research relationship, beginning with the researcher's expression of her sense of privilege; including a negotiation of permission to use sensitive material; reaching a shared understanding of the 'heart of the matter' and culminating in a statement by Kaye which expresses the essence of her message to this researcher: the most important, demanding and satisfying learning enterprise is the search for oneself.

MG: I really do appreciate that you've given me all this - that you've shared all your personal life with me. I'd like to be able to write that up in the thesis, because... I see how all that story is somehow related to your -

Kaye: Educational development.

MG: Yes. This experience... it gives the whole thing a - a rich dimension, I think.

Kaye: Yair, I think I started - that's fine by me, by the way -I think I started thinking early on that I would like to work out in my mind how much heredity as opposed to environment affected me. But now, having found my half sister, and knowing a whole lot more about the family, probably I would say that much more important than heredity and environment would be just identity. I think finding my own biological identity has just made a huge difference to my confidence, self-confidence... Just knowing a little bit about my background.

MG: Who you are?

Kaye: Yair, that's more important to me now...
MG: So your picture of yourself now, it’s got all this about who your parents were and that sort of thing, but you’re also modifying that picture of yourself? Your sense of identity, so it can include your intellectual ability?
Kaye: Mm -
MG: You’re still not sure about whether you want that bit!
Kaye: My half-sister - I keep going back to her sensitivity, and that’s something I’ve never been able to share with anyone, family. I don’t think you could share it really with a friend. I feel a sort of calmness that there’s someone else who does have those very close feelings about life... I can’t explain really, you can’t put it into words... I almost feel there’s a part of me that hasn’t developed as it should have developed, because I haven’t been able to share that part of me with anyone before... I’ve been isolated in those feelings, so they haven’t developed. Yair, that’s a way of putting it...
MG: In terms of the inner personal work on identity, discovering who you are, you’ve really been working very hard.
Kaye: Yair, yair. Very exhausting. It’s emotionally exhausting. But I’m finding inner peace... I’m a reasonably casual laid back sort of person, I think, but it’s quite funny even for me to start feeling even more peaceful. But it’s very, very deeply peaceful.
MG: Marvellous.
Kaye: Yair, yes, it’s good, yair. I advocate finding out who you are, whoever you are. (Interview 4, 24.11.89).

Kaye’s description of personal growth as ‘finding out who you are’ suggests that her personal extracurricular learning agenda was of the nature of a spiritual quest. She was guided on this quest by a counsellor whom she consulted from time to time. This experience, together with the fact that she herself was frequently consulted informally by the parents of children she worked with led her to consider counselling as a possible career, and her study was undertaken to this end. However, apart from its credentialling capacity (‘a piece of paper, a means to an end’) the formal study experience did not become very meaningful in terms of her quest. As the extracts from interviews quoted in other sections suggest, insufficient links were made between the two realities.

7.2.4.4 Integrating study into the personal context

Ingrid is an example of a person for whom off-campus study had become an essential part of her way of life. Her first off-campus enrolment was in a Bachelor of Arts degree course with the Gippsland Institute. After successfully completing a number of units, she withdrew rather than attempt the statistics component of the Psychology
course. However, she missed studying so much that after a time she enrolled with Deakin University, where Psychology was not an essential requirement for Arts. Her distress in 1989 when through an administrative error a failure was wrongly recorded on her semester's results slip provides a measure of the part study played in her life. Her comment at the thought that her continued progress might be threatened was, 'I'd miss it dreadfully'.

Among other things, study facilitated social contact with like-minded women. Ingrid valued the peer group friendship network which she had formed while studying with the Institute, and the fact that most of the other women had continued with their studies was an incentive for her to resume. Study also gave her shared interests with her tertiary-educated daughter, and status in her daughter's eyes. She faced a restricted future caring for a husband who suffered from a degenerative disease. In this situation study could be both a respite and a coping strategy.

As the daughter of immigrant parents Ingrid had strong ties with Victorian rural and coastal life as well as with Scandinavia. This dual cultural affiliation was manifest in her conversation, in the choice of decorative objects in her home, and in her student career. In 1988 she continued her study of the social history of Victoria while on a visit to Europe, writing and dispatching an assignment from Sweden while staying with relatives. Furthermore, she planned to include the study of Nordic literature in her degree program, an option made possible by inter-university cross-crediting agreements. Thus, apart from being functional in her personal context, study was meaningful to Ingrid in ways which linked to her personal and family history.
CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS,

8.1 Introduction

In the discussion of meaning in Chapter 3, the term is construed in two senses as it relates to distinct, but associated aspects of this research project. The following summary of findings is presented in terms of these two senses. In the first instance the phrase 'communication of meaning' is interpreted in the sociological sense as referring to the interpretive processes operative during interaction by which social actors make meaning of their experience. When education is understood as cultural transmission, a social process occurring within social institutions (Singleton, 1974, 23), it is apparent that although it may be an individualistic form of learning, distance education nevertheless entails the construction and negotiation of shared meanings.

The second sense in which meaning is used refers to the investigation of individual meaning frameworks or mental constructs. As defined in Chapter 3, such constructs or belief systems may be understood both as internalised cultural and psychological assumptions and as the symbolic structure of the individual's personal odyssey or lifelong development program.

8.1.1 Social processes and the transmission of culture

The attempt to analyse the experience of the seventeen people interviewed in sociological terms has revealed that, indeed, some of the processes of secondary socialisation can be discerned in their interactions with the educational institutions and some estimation can be made as to the degree to which they became integrated into the institutions' social and cultural milieux. It is clear that, in contrast to processes of socialisation which result in metamorphosis, such as induction to the armed forces, religious organisations or even corporate cultures, the process which these off-campus students experienced resulted in their being comparatively weakly integrated into the institutional cultures.

To the extent that these results are generalisable, one would therefore expect populations of off-campus students to be characterised by diversity rather than similarity from enrolment through to graduation. However, the restriction of the study to the first two years of the student experience means that the full extent of integration eventually achieved by the ten participants who continued their enrolment beyond 1989 was not assessed. It could be expected that continuing integration would occur over time. Indeed, reporting on research conducted in 1985, researchers at the UK Open
University comment on students' sense of belonging:

Students see themselves as members of a university with a special character and significance (Student Research Centre, 1986, 14).

Although incomplete, the process of socialisation was nevertheless an integral part of the reality of off-campus study. A significant and problematic aspect of this process was the acquisition of cultural knowledge, or enculturation. As explained in Chapter 3, cultural knowledge includes not only what people need to know to operate successfully in routine situations, but also knowledge of values, attitudes and beliefs. Enculturation therefore entails not only acquisition of behavioural skills but also adoption of cultural standards and symbolic codes. A feature of complex modern societies noted in Chapter 3 is that enculturation typically occurs in multiple selected domains of a larger cultural matrix, and like socialisation, is a matter of degree: the migrant who wishes to achieve acceptance as a member of an adopted community requires a much greater comprehension and mastery than the short-term visitor (Hansen, 1979, 25-28). The domain of higher education was one of many culturally defined contexts within which these adult students had competence. As well as identifying themselves as Australians, each of them had some sense of affiliation to a particular ethnic community in Europe or the United Kingdom, either as their own birthplace or at the remove of one or two generations. Those who lived in the Latrobe Valley expressed a strong sense of regional identity. Others were affiliated with professional cultures. These streams of cultural identity were inter-related and were threaded through the interview conversations.

The newly enrolled students entered or re-entered the domain of higher education with varying degrees of familiarity, and their degree of involvement varied from that of tourist to insider or habitué. In terms of the degree of fit between the culture of higher education and other domains which were familiar to the people interviewed, the interview material demonstrates that gender was the most significant structural factor. The effect of gender was most evident in the following ways: the overall higher educational standard already achieved by most of the men and therefore their greater familiarity with the culture of higher education; the internalisation of culturally transmitted negative attitudes and beliefs about women and higher education; and the relative exclusion of women who were not employed outside the home from access to relevant social stocks of knowledge. In terms of degree of integration into the cultures of the two institutions over the two-year period of the study, the greatest change was observed in the women students.

As anticipated, acquisition of cultural knowledge was especially critical in the period between the completion of enrolment forms and the beginning of the first semester.
There were differences in the ways in which the two institutions recognised and attempted to meet this need. The Institute placed more emphasis on providing group experiences at the main campus, with the result that its induction process resembled more closely that of on-campus students. Presumably this reflected a greater emphasis on the social dimension of learning and a corresponding appreciation of the extent to which cultural knowledge is acquired through informal face-to-face social interaction. However, the advantages for the Institute’s students of such approaches were somewhat offset by the timing of dispatch of course materials. In the period just prior to the start of the semester, the new students were hungry for information, particularly about the content and management of their courses and the skills required to succeed. The perusal of course materials was seen as essential to gaining adequate information about such matters.

Language is the prime medium of cultural transmission and therefore the key to enculturation. Administrative terminology is a potential source of alienation for people seeking entry to higher education institutions, but was not emphasised as a special problem by this group of students, few of whom have been categorised as novices with respect to the culture of higher education. However, the encounter with academic discourses was much more problematic, sometimes constituting culture shock which in one case contributed to early withdrawal. As Meyer, the study skills adviser at Deakin University recognised, assessment by written assignments is a test of competence in ‘the language of the campus’, but this was not always recognised by the students or made explicit to them. Mark, John and Matthew, all of whom had considerable previous experience of higher education, were particularly sophisticated learners in this respect. Brian, who was able to attend tutorials conducted by a person who was a good interpreter of the academic culture, was quick to appreciate the significance of discipline-specific dictionaries as part of the tacit or hidden curriculum.

An effect of relative social isolation noted in the foregoing chapters is that individuals had a certain freedom to define the nature and content of the learning experience according to their personal needs and meaning frameworks. Study could be defined instrumentally as a means to an end, enjoyed for its intrinsic qualitities, or endowed with meaning and significance in terms of the personal context. Elements of all three approaches existed in some cases. In addition, gender-constructed disjunctions between students’ and institutional definitions of knowing and learning were observed, although not necessarily identified as such by the students. It is not suggested that students’ definitions were constructed entirely without reference to, or interaction with, the institutional culture. On the contrary, some evidence was presented to suggest that instrumentalism, for example, could be a product of both student attitudes and institutional practices, a finding which supports Harris’s (1987) argument to that effect.
In Chapter 2 it was noted that the definition of the most desirable balance between interactive and independent learning activities is regarded as an issue by distance educators. The evidence produced by this study is somewhat equivocal in respect to how much the students needed or desired interaction. While personal circumstances accounted for the choice of off-campus study by all seventeen students, a preference for maintaining distance was evident in some cases, while in others there was a desire for greater integration. Several of the students expressed a preference for full-time on-campus study, which can be taken as a wish for more complete integration and identification with the institutional culture, but only Cathy, who lived near her campus and was not in paid employment, made significant moves towards greater integration.

The interview material suggests that with respect to the issue of interaction and independence, the rather ambivalent results can be attributed to the interplay of several factors: pragmatism (including time constraints); inhibiting effects of unfamiliarity with institutional personnel and culture; the politics of the staff-student relationship; the need for control; and the desire for quality. The inhibiting effects of social isolation were apparent in students' occasional hesitancy about communicating with the campus by telephone. Matthew described the idea of consulting a tutor whom he had never met in a situation which deprived him of non-verbal cues as 'terrifying' (7.2.2.2). Even though supplied with academic staff members' home telephone numbers, students tended to regard contacting staff at home outside normal office hours as intruding on their privacy, not realising that this is not necessarily so interpreted in an academic culture. Some of these phenomena are well documented, for example, by Nation (1985).

While Betty, Kaye and Diane were all keen to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the provision of face-to-face sessions at the Institute’s Churchill campus, they were reluctant to add their names to the list of students in their locality which was posted up at a weekend school by external studies staff in an attempt to facilitate the formation of regional student support groups. They refrained from responding to this invitation for greater interaction because they were choosy about which other students they would work with. In the event, according to Kaye, groups formed on the basis of existing social networks: ‘The nurses and the chalkies got together’.

Both issues of quality and control can be observed as contributing to Matthew’s distance from the faculty and John's selective participation in tutorials. To satisfy the quality of Matthew’s approach to his courses a collegial form of interaction was required, but, because of his marginal situation, he did not feel sufficiently in control of the circumstances to bring about the desired outcome, although he had an intense desire
for intellectual engagement. John attended some tutorials at Deakin's Melbourne Study Centre but left after the first hour when and if he was not satisfied with the quality of the tutorial:

John: So I've just excused myself and gone I'm afraid, but I feel it's exerting one's studentship rights to walk out of that which is pointless (Interview 2, 10.6.88).

The assessment system, particularly the performance of written assignments, was identified as the main arena for interaction not only with staff but also with peers. In this context three needs were apparent: the needs for personalisation, for continuity of relationships and for interpretation of the institutional culture.

John's comments on the way his assignments were marked exemplify the identification of quality with personalised communication:

John: I've very much appreciated the comments of this second guy, who's more or less written back a personal comment about what he actually believes about certain things and that's where you are more or less into a personal dialogue situation. Now that's pretty high level teaching when you are at that...

Can I just finish by saying that those personal comments that came back on the essays, they have been very important in the institution selling itself to the customer. Through that it is probably going to leave more imprint on me in the years to come than whether or not it's got big buildings or little buildings... The quality of the staff as translated through their comments will be the thing that I will remember. I will be keeping those comments. (Interview 2, 10.6.88).

Continuity and consistency were also important factors in the promotion of quality in interpersonal communication. Students were disappointed when each assignment was marked by a different person, as this virtually precluded any possibility of building interpersonal relationships, and they were confused when the criteria for assessment appeared to differ from one marker to another and from one subject to another. As Brian's, Matthew's and John's accounts testify, the students also appreciated the role of tutors as interpreters of the institutional culture. John critiqued a tutorial he attended as follows:

John: Now, you can say, well, it's all in the book. It seems to me that part of the point of tutorials is to help you read between the lines of what is in the book and I would have expected there would have been a basic rundown on aims and objectives and also a bit more about the Deakin faculty, the
way it operates and the fact that there is a library to ring and so forth.
(Interview 2, 10.6.88).

These findings in respect to student needs are consistent with the expressed opinions of
other distance educators and theorists such as Baath (1982.); Northcott and Shapcott
(Grace) (1986); and Thorpe et al. (1986).

The phenomenon of withdrawal was examined from the student's point of view. All of
the five people who withdrew from their courses considered their withdrawal as an
interruption to their continuing education rather than an exit from the realm of higher
education. Nevertheless four of the five experienced a sense of failure even though in
ev every case their inability to continue was in large measure a result of the force of
circumstances. The fifth person had achieved his personal goals by the end of one
semester. Thus it can be seen that withdrawal might be defined rather differently from
the student perspective and have a different set of meanings for the student than for the
institution. In the cases studied, appropriate words for the student experience would be
'deferal', 'postponement' or 'goal attainment' rather than terms such as 'withdrawal',
'attrition' or 'drop out'.

Disempowerment by social isolation is an aspect of distance education which has been
noted by Grace (1989); Harris (1987); and Rumble (1989). The politics of staff-student
relationships was not seriously questioned by the students during the interviews
although some of their accounts graphically illustrated the imbalance of power which
was inherent in the basic dynamic established by the award of credit for learning
outcomes. So long as staff exercised their rights and discharged their responsibilities in
what the students considered an appropriate manner, this basic imbalance was not
remarked upon. Some, but not all, were prepared to negotiate with staff over what they
saw as injustices such as an undeservedly poor mark for an assignment. In the one
more serious case of repeated failure (in the student's judgment) by a staff member to
carry out his responsibilities, the student was not prepared to press a formal complaint
even though his inadequate professional behaviour made her learning task more
arduous and time-consuming. Her choice not to take any action beyond contacting the
staff member concerned can be understood when her circumstances are considered. To
take such action as an individual would probably have been a time-consuming exercise
of doubtful benefit and possible negative repercussions, and the practicalities of
organising a class complaint were sufficiently difficult to preclude such a course.
Social marginality compounded the student's difficulties and contributed to her
disempowerment.
The level of acceptance by most of the students of the power imbalance indicates a
degree of shared cultural meanings, attitudes and values which included a basic
recognition of the authority of the institutions as repositories and disseminators of
knowledge, of their right to confer academic awards, and of the status of those awards
in the larger community. This is not surprising, since some such acceptance is implicit
in the act of enrolment. Only Kaye expressed any serious challenge to such attitudes
and values. After two years, her initial sense of cultural distance from the Institute was
augmented by a certain cynicism about an experience which she defined as ‘not really
education’ (7.2.3.2).

8.1.2 The world of the student

In relation to conventional tertiary educational settings, where the student either lives
on campus or travels there daily, it is easy to think of the student being socialised into
or incorporated within the campus culture. This image has been found to be less
appropriate in the cases of these off-campus students. Instead it may be more
productive to think of the institutional culture, or at least parts of it, being integrated
into the personal context of the student. Such integration required adjustments on the
part of the student as well as negotiation with others. Issues of identity were sometimes
raised by participation in multiple domains of reality and integration of the new domain
into existing contexts:

Cathy: It’s trying to put all these roles together with gello that’s the trick bit, isn’t
it? Trying to make them all sort of workable. Together. (Interview 4,
20.11.89).

Two different ways of integrating the institutional culture have been identified in this
study: it may be shared with others in the home, the workplace or other social settings
within the personal context, or it may become the focus of a very private alternate
reality.

The workplace was found to be, either actually or in potential, a valuable source of
information about higher education institutions, a validating context for the enterprise
of studying, and a locus for student peer support. However, inequalities constructed by
gender were found to be operative in this respect. Compared to those who were in paid
employment, the six married women who were not employed outside the home were
relatively disadvantaged in terms of access to information, validation and peer support.
In the same terms of validation and support, the home environment was on the whole
less supportive for the women than for the men, but this had some apparently
contradictory outcomes. The low status of domestic work and the social isolation
caused by domestication were found to be contributing factors to such women’s motivations for taking up study. Furthermore, because they had greater need for opportunities to acquire cultural knowledge, such women were more likely to participate in group learning activities.

The home was predominantly the place used by all the people interviewed for doing the work associated with being a student. Although some worked on the campus or at Deakin’s Melbourne Study Centre, this use of other space was limited to occasional tutorial participation and visits to libraries. Apart from these places the only other locations were mentioned by John, a commuter who said that he read course materials in the train and used lunch hours at work for study, and Dave, who was also sometimes able to study at his place of employment.

Reflecting on research on teletutorials conducted by Deakin University in 1988 and 1989, Thompson (1990, 227-228) describes a home as a place which ‘caters essentially for the domestic needs of a family ’ and warns tutors against making the assumption that the home is invariably a fitting place for somebody to take part in a tutorial, since achieving a quiet environment in the home is often elusive. Thompson comes close to defining the teletutorial as an intrusion into a private realm which is shared with others who have legitimate but conflicting needs and rights with respect to the attention of the student and the use of time and space. Similar observations have been made by Evans (1990) who draws on aspects of the social theory of Giddens to problematise the concepts of distance and time in the context of distance education.

Although the decision to interview the students at home was part of the original research proposal, the problematics of the home as the locus of study is an issue which has emerged from the research experience rather than being a focus for investigation from the outset. However, although no systematic attempt was made to investigate the students’ study habits in relation to the use of the home as the place of study, a certain amount of information was gleaned.

Giving study its own time and space within the home was problematic for all of the people interviewed except for Mary, a single woman who lived alone, and Kaye, also unmarried, who shared a house with another woman. The needs of others, especially children, were frequently in direct competition for both time and space in all other cases. Even the one single man and the two older women experienced such difficulties. Andrew was in a parental situation by virtue of his role as a boarding master in a private school; Alice’s problems with neighbours have been mentioned; and Ingrid, at age sixty, spent a lot of time on grandmother duty, sometimes to the detriment of her study.
There is some evidence that one of the students regarded home and family life as sacrosanct, and that off-campus study proved to be incompatible with such an attitude. John's choice to be interviewed in his office in the city rather than at home; his use of times and places outside the home for studying; and the reason he gave for not completing the degree course after he had satisfied his main learning goal all suggest an attitude to the home similar to that articulated by Thompson. Having decided to limit the extent that he would allow study to intrude on family life, he was unable to continue.

Four of the men, but only one of the women mentioned having space in the house specifically designated as a study. In two of these homes the student conducted me into the study for the interview. Most of the interviews were conducted in a more communal living area such as a kitchen, lounge or family room where both television sets and telephone were in view. Only five people, the two single women, Cathy, one of the married women, and two of the men mentioned having a computer in the home. The computer Cathy used was bought by her husband, originally for his own use, and he taught her to use it. It could be expected that several of the participants had access to a computer at their workplace, but it cannot be assumed that such access was sufficient for the purposes of their study. Dave had occasional access to computers at work and hoped that this would be sufficient for the purposes of his course on computer applications in business, but in the event his progress was severely affected because he did not own a computer.

The world of the student extends beyond the home, and here again it is important for distance educators to be able to make some assessment of the resources available to students in their local communities. Unlike the students interviewed by Inglis (1989) in North Queensland, the students interviewed in this study lived in an environment which was comparatively rich in educational resources. Apart from the Deakin Study Centre, located in the same premises as the Council of Adult Education, the city of Melbourne offered a range of libraries, bookshops, art galleries and theatres as well as facilities on the campuses of other tertiary institutions. The cities of Ballarat and Geelong had tertiary institutions from whose libraries off-campus students enrolled elsewhere could borrow in person. By comparison the town of Sale was less well provided, although the local video library was able to supply Ingrid with viewing recommended in her study guides.

It is not suggested that local resources should replace the delivery of materials directly from the 'parent' campus to the home. People whose mobility is restricted may be unable to avail themselves of local resources. In my own case, working as an
off-campus postgraduate student living in a capital city half a continent away from the
campus, it is frequently more convenient to use Deakin University's excellent
door-to-door off-campus library service than to cross the city to the nearest university
library.

8.1.3 Personal meaning frameworks

According to Ricoeur, hermeneutics or interpretation is:

the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in
the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the
literal meaning (Ricoeur, 1974, 13).

One of the purposes of the interpretive method used in this research project was to
uncover some of the levels of meaning behind the students' apparent reasons for taking
up a course of formal study in adult life. It is virtually impossible to do justice to the
specificity and the complexity of the interview data. The themes and illustrative
examples chosen in the preceding chapters are necessarily selective, and some
speculative levels of interpretation suggested by the material have not been included
because they are too difficult to substantiate. With these provisos, the following is
offered as a summary of the readily apparent, and some more subtle levels of meaning
which affected the students' learning experiences.

According to the schema established in Chapter 5, the meaning of the student
experience was construed as a product of interaction between personal context,
off-campus study and institutional culture. Included in the concept of 'personal context'
was the person's internalised belief system, or meaning framework. In Chapter 3 it was
noted that both learning theorists (Candy, 1980; Kelly, 1955; Mezirow, 1977; 1981)
and cultural theorists of education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) conceive of the
existence of multi-dimensional mental models by reference to which individuals 'make
sense' of experience.

Mezirow's (1977; 1981) concept of adult learning as perspective transformation has
been mentioned in relation to the underlying structures of meaning observed to be
operative in the way some of the interviewees approached formal study. Meaning
perspectives are defined as culturally produced personal paradigms, or:

...cultural and psychological assumptions that influence the way we see
ourselves and our relationships and the way we pattern our lives
(Mezirow, 1977, 154).

Relating his ideas to the three generic domains of cognitive interest distinguished by
Habermas, Mezirow describes perspective transformation as an emancipatory process
which is 'a crucial developmental task of maturity' (1977, 163). The transformation of such perspectives involves becoming critically aware of the ideologics which have contributed to one's existential situation, and may result in dramatic personal and social change.

In the preceding chapters the reader may trace and participate in the exploration and progressive unfolding of the meaning perspectives of some of the people interviewed. Reference has been made to Matthew's and Kaye's stories in such terms. Matthew's critical awareness included questioning both habitual ways of behaving and the paradigm or mind set in which his medical education and practice were embedded. His need for privacy can be appreciated as a way of protecting insecurity, since the transformation in perspective affected him profoundly, and had the potential to threaten his credibility as a medical practitioner.

Since the concept of learning as perspective transformation was originally 'inductively derived from a national study of women participating in college re-entry programs' (Mezirow, 1981, 6), it is not surprising that aspects of this process can be identified in the accounts of most of the women interviewed. In Chapters 5 and 6 reference is made to the fact that the tension associated with taking up formal study was partly due to the fact that in so doing the prospective students were challenging aspects of their belief systems. In particular the women had to confront culturally constructed and individually internalised negative beliefs about their capacity and aptitude for higher education.

As might be expected, and as the accounts presented in the preceding chapters indicate, the women varied as to the amount of change evident in their personal circumstances and the degree of critical awareness which they brought to the experience. The effect of off-campus study on the process of transformation also varied. It contributed to change in Cathy and Diane, and to some extent in Betty. For Diane this appeared to be mainly through confidence building, but for Cathy and Betty exposure to new ideas was clearly also an important factor. The fact that the content of her courses did not become an integral part of the perspective transformation already taking place in Kaye is an important aspect of her sense of alienation from the study experience.

Diane's comments at the end of 1988 quoted in Chapter 7 show that the experience was intensely meaningful to her in terms of a process of personal development in which she was emancipating herself from internalised gender-constructed inhibitions. Perusal of some of the literature on female mature-age students (Kelly, 1987; Martin, 1988) confirms that her experience is representative of married female mature-age
returnees in several respects. A progress can be traced from initial apprehension associated with low self-esteem to re-assessment of academic ability followed by demystification of the educational institution and increase in self confidence. Associated with this progress are the issues of status and voice. As the quoted extracts attest, the low status of housework, the search for identity and the need to be able to articulate one's ideas and experience were shared preoccupations among the women interviewed.

Socialising influences help to structure a person's construction of meaning, and can be powerful when they reinforce each other (Herrmann, 1988, 8). The connection between motivation for study and career achievement is one of the more obvious sources of meaning for off-campus study, and was made repeatedly in the recorded conversations with most of the people interviewed. In the lives of Dave and Patrick, the socialising effects of gender, family, career and higher education were for the most part mutually reinforcing. Neither placed much emphasis on the intrinsic interest or value of the course content; it appears that their courses were sufficiently meaningful to them in other terms. Both Dave and Patrick were studying for vocational reasons which were part of a stereotypically male pattern in which career was closely linked to the roles of husband, father and provider. Both were supported by their wives for whom their spouse's part-time study had meaning as a family enterprise.

A further layer of meaning became apparent when the employment contexts of these men were studied by interviewing them at their place of work rather than at home, and by questioning which probed for the meaning of their work. In both cases, the theme of service linked and added meaning to the roles of husband, father and provider, and appeared to contribute significantly to sense of self-worth. Both men had chosen careers in which they could be of service to the community. For them, the meaning of promotion and career advancement was not only recognition and material reward, but also the attainment of a better, more powerful position in which service could be rendered more effectively. The mutually reinforcing effect of these meanings was apparent in their student and professional careers. During 1988 Patrick succeeded in effecting job change which satisfied his need for more responsible service, and his motivation for study improved. Dave's motivation was flagging at the end of 1988, a year in which he had been passed over for promotion several times, but revived the following year when the looked-for promotion was achieved.

There is potential for any one of the four elements of gender, parenthood, career and higher education either to reinforce or to contradict the others in significant ways. Unlike the male pattern to which Patrick and Dave conformed, the female pattern
described above represents non-conformity with the established conventional stereotype. In the sense that women who undertake higher education are potentially upsetting the *status quo*, Diane’s humorous remark, ‘I could become a menace to society’ is most apposite. It is not suggested, however, that women’s movement towards emancipation through higher education is necessarily accompanied by radical change in their personal contexts. Because it can be integrated into their personal contexts with a minimum of disruption, off-campus study offers some women a way of coming to terms with those aspects of reality which they cannot change.

In respect to several of the people interviewed, the underlying meaning of the experience of off-campus study can be understood in terms of a personal agenda associated with lifelong developmental patterns. The term ‘second chance’ has been applied to mature-age study, for example by Martin (1988). This term is something of a misnomer, since for people who have been denied the opportunity of tertiary study at the conventional stage of late adolescence by circumstances such as class, gender, ethnicity or physical disability, taking up study in adult life constitutes a first chance of a higher education. A sense of satisfaction derived from achieving something previously desired but unavailable is thus an important dimension of the meaning structures of many mature-age students. For some of the students mature age study represented not so much a second chance as a second bite of the cherry. Both Matthew and Mark commented on the fact that, perhaps for the first time in human history, many people now have both time and energy to explore new domains of learning and further develop their intellect in addition to performing essential tasks of adulthood such as earning a living and raising a family.

The accounts of Ingrid and Alice show that the appreciation of opportunity and the sense of satisfaction in achievement intensify with age, as the time available for completing one’s life’s agenda diminishes. Ingrid especially radiated a quiet sense of pleasure when she talked about her studies, which can be interpreted as satisfaction that a personal potential which would otherwise have been wasted was now realised. Another layer of meaning became apparent when her experience was considered in the context of her family history, a theme to which she returned repeatedly. In retrospect, Ingrid could see that her father’s childhood experiences as the son of a widow in Sweden at the turn of the century had taught him the value of an education which later as an immigrant farmer he toiled to provide for his children:

Ingrid: I know how he worked in the fields, he’d come home at ten o’clock at night, I can remember him with drums with lanterns on them so he could see ploughing and I thought, ‘He did all that for us, we should have achieved more, we should have done something better for ourselves, was that just a wasted effort on his part?’ If only he had lived longer he’d have
been proud. I fully realise now what Dad was trying to do, what he had in mind. He wanted to educate us, but he had so many of us, he had such a big job in those days, paying off the land and everything. He was always putting out his two hands and saying, 'I came here with nothing but these.' He said he did the best he knew how. My mother, as I said, didn't worry about the girls' education, but he cared just as much for the girls, because he could see his mother struggling, trying to make a living for her little boys over there in Sweden. (Interview 1,28.2.88)

By continuing her education Ingrid was ensuring that the struggles of the past were bearing fruit in the present, and thus making return to her father. At this level of interpretation, Ingrid's higher education had meaning in terms of redeeming, repairing, or healing the past and transmitting culture across generations and continents. These characteristic themes, which form the essential pattern associated with this person revealed by the hermeneutic process, were manifest in many ways in her life story and conversation.

The interpretation of the interview material supports the view that the most influential meanings in the students' subjective realities were those constructed in terms of established personal contexts. If the enterprise was meaningful to them in these terms, students continued with it, in spite of the disadvantages of studying in relative isolation, and even if there were significant deficiencies in the content and conduct of their courses or in their integration to the institutional culture.

Mary persisted with her two-year graduate diploma course even though she was dissatisfied with it. She thought much of the course content was either inadequate or irrelevant to her needs, and she was critical of the professionalism of one member of staff. However the qualification she would obtain was very meaningful in terms of her established professional identity. A single woman, her life was dedicated mainly to her teaching, towards which she exhibited an unsentimental but caring commitment. Her enrolment with the Institute was a response to an invitation by her school Principal to develop a specialism in a particular area and assume associated responsibilities. This represented both encouragement and a challenge to learn by opening herself to a new experience, since recognition and credibility in the area were dependent on gaining accreditation in a recognised course of study. Mary's persistence with a poor quality learning experience over two years is a measure of her commitment to teaching and of the value she put on professional credibility.

The examples above illustrate how studying was a meaningful activity in terms of the students' personal contexts and personal constructs. However, studying was not a
satisfactory experience if it was meaningful only in these terms. Motivation was severely affected if students were unable to construct a congruent picture of the institutional culture from its available manifestations. In making explicit the problems of cultural interpretation experienced by new students when they encounter the text of course materials, Northedge (1988) comments:

This urge to escape the study process is a sign of the deep discomfort caused to us when we cannot 'make sense' of something. We are beings whose entire lives revolve around and are dependent upon meanings, so that situations where meanings elude us are experienced as undermining and repellent. Because by its nature study involves dismantling old meanings and constructing new, it arouses powerful and ambivalent feelings (Northedge, 1987, 149).

If the institutional culture does not 'make sense' to the student, then study may not be meaningful in itself but rather becomes a means to an end, as it did for Kaye. Although she persisted with the course, her commitment diminished rapidly after the first semester in 1988. Kaye's sense of alienation can be attributed partly to personal identity issues, but it is also clear that disillusionment with aspects of the institutional culture was an important factor. Her ambivalence about her degree course with the Institute can be construed as a sign that the enterprise was not satisfying her need for meaning.

8.2 Implications for theory and practice

The results of this study of the experience of a small sample of off-campus students can be summarised as three main findings. Firstly, the acquisition of cultural knowledge was a necessary but problematic aspect of becoming an off-campus student, a 'hidden' curriculum which increased the learning task, especially in the first year of enrolment. The second finding is that gender constituted the most significant dimension of difference in this sample of students, affecting reasons for studying, motivation, and almost every aspect of the way off-campus study was experienced. Thirdly, the students' personal contexts had primacy as the domain of reality in terms of which meaning was constructed and validated.

These findings are applicable to other distance education contexts to the extent that they are framed within a generalisable conceptual model of education as cultural transmission in which recognised processes of socialisation and enculturation pertain. Their contribution to the field is significant because little has been published to date on either the sociological or the gendered dimension of distance education.
In the context of the conceptual model developed, a relationship between gender, culture and distance education is argued. If differentiation by gender is one of the basic structural elements of our culture, it follows that people construct their knowledge from gender-specific sets of meanings, so that there are significant differences between men’s and women’s experience, conceptions of knowledge, and ways of knowing. Feminist analysis characterises modern education systems as masculist, a consequence of the historical exclusion of women from participation in the construction of ‘areas of codified knowledge such as history or art or political science’ (Spender, 1980, 59). For women, therefore, participation in higher education is an encounter with a culture which is not only unfamiliar but, in certain respects, foreign.

The implications of gender awareness and cultural awareness are discussed below in terms of access and equity, student support, theoretical models of teaching and learning, and research.

8.2.1 Implications for access and equity

The sample of people studied was relatively homogeneous in terms of class and ethnicity, and sophisticated in terms of cultural ‘fit’ with the two teaching institutions. If the findings reported are significant for the education of such people, they have even greater relevance for the education of people who are culturally more distant from such institutions. Such clienteles may be sections of the dominant culture such as women, rural people or working class people; or ethnically defined minorities, such as the indigenous peoples of Australia, Canada and the USA. Cultural differences between the student population and educational institutions are also significant factors in the education of indigenous peoples of third world countries (Ellerton and Clements, 1990; Guy, 1990; 1991) or in the practice of exporting distance education courses as marketable commodities (Kelly, 1988).

Distance education has been hailed as a means of providing access to education by sections of the population otherwise excluded, or non-traditional clienteles who are, by definition, relatively distant from the culture of higher education. The use of the word ‘open’ in the title ‘Open University’ is an indicator of such ideals. In Australia, Commonwealth Government interest in distance education in respect to Access and Equity policy is well documented (Anwyl et al., 1987; Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC) guidelines for the triennia 1982-84 and 1985-87; Dawkins, 1988; Johnson, 1983; Northcott and Shapcott (Grace) 1986; Williams, 1979), while the expansion of distance education programs in developing countries is a well known phenomenon (Arger, 1990; Guy, 1991; Rumble, 1989).
While the achievements of distance education in respect to increasing access are rightly lauded, critical reflection on these phenomena is of vital importance. It is easy to promote distance education uncritically as a ‘good thing’ while neglecting crucial factors which affect the quality of educational outcomes. Quoting Jewson and Mason (1986), Nunan (1987) distinguishes between liberal and radical definitions of equal opportunity. The liberal view is that all individuals are allowed to enter into competition for social rewards, but the radical approach is more concerned with equality of outcomes, or equity. The latter implies a challenge to existing systems because it entails the identification of aspects of institutional and social practice which constitute structural barriers to equity. Institutional insensitivity to cultural and gendered differences is both an access and an equity issue.

The relevance of cultural factors to the achievement of the ideal of open access is understood by Harris and Holmes (1975), who critique the UK Open University as an elitist institution on the basis that its forms of communication fail to bridge the gap between working-class culture and academic knowledge. Further, describing working-class students as ‘newcomers to the academic game’ Harris and Holmes ascribe the poor performance of such students relative to middle-class students to the fact that their unfamiliarity with the culture of higher education makes it more difficult for them to acquire strategic knowledge such as how to identify the essential parts of a course.

Burge and Lenskyj (1990) and Kirkup (1988) contend that feminist agendas for achieving equity must extend to the reconstruction of curricula and pedagogy:

We don’t simply want to make higher education a place where women can be more comfortable; we want to change the nature of what has previously constituted the disciplines so that we are in the content as well as in the institution, in the lecture as well as the lecture theatre. Or in the case of distance education, in the text as well as in the armchair studying it (Kirkup, 1988, 287).

Two broad strategies for bridging cultural distance have been identified in this thesis: one is to acknowledge, utilise and communicate with the world of the student; the other is to provide explication and interpretation of the institutional culture.

The way the people interviewed used friends and acquaintances as informans, role models, and reference groups is an indicator of the importance of the social dimension of becoming an off-campus student and of the value to educational institutions of the student’s personal context. This has implications for recruitment and access. The
relative availability of such people for those in this sample indicates that information about external studies constituted part of the available social stock of knowledge. More socially isolated people and those living in less well resourced parts of the country would be comparatively disadvantaged in these terms. Gender and physical disability are important dimensions of such disadvantage.

8.2.2 Implications for student support

The data presented support Meacham's interactionist definition of student support as the facilitation of shared definitions of teaching and learning. Defined in such terms, student support is seen to be integral to all aspects of distance education, not a separate function. Awareness of social processes associated with both cultural and gendered differences should inform the work of policy makers, administrators, academic staff, course developers, counsellors and others. Recognition of students' differential needs for cultural knowledge and interpretation should affect not only the way all personnel interact with off-campus students, but also the content and design of course materials.

From an appreciation of the processes and problematics of acquiring, and negotiating with, an institutional culture from a marginal position, one can also argue for the employment of people whose main role is to be interpreters of culture, or, in Sewant's (1981) terms, intermediaries. Three important aspects of such mediation between student and institutional culture are: provision of information, interpretation and advocacy. Such personnel exist in distance education systems as tutors, counsellors, liaison officers, and student advisors. In addition, student associations can offer not only a political lobby but also a student-centred interpretive service and independent advocacy (Grace, 1989; Williams and Williams, 1987). Of the various forms of intermediary service mentioned by the students interviewed, the tutor was the most appreciated, but probably also the least available, except in the limited role of assignment marker.

The findings have immediate implications for the work of counsellors. Firstly, by conceptualising the first year experience as an encounter with a different culture, a framework is provided for understanding the processes which off-campus students must pass through, the subjective experiences they are likely to have, and their needs in terms of cultural knowledge. Such a framework is applicable both to personal counselling and to the work of study skills advisors who should see themselves as interpreters of a culture rather than technical experts. As Northedge (1988) contends:

Unfortunately the problems of learning are commonly conceived of only as problems within the individual learner, within the individual teacher, or
within the subject matter itself. Instead they should often be understood as socio-cultural problems arising out of the difficult social process of constructing shared meanings when participants' thought processes are not permeated by the same cultural assumptions (Northedge, 1988, 1).

Secondly, by relating the experience of study to the matrix of the students' personal contexts, a conceptual contribution is made to a task first defined by Morgan, Taylor and Gibbs (1982), that of understanding the distance learner as a whole person. While it is not suggested that the seventeen case studies comprise a comprehensive survey of the great range of motivations and meanings which off-campus students bring with them to the experience of tertiary study, nevertheless, they do offer useful insights into possible depths of individual meanings, and more generalisable observations on the effects of gender.

The findings suggest that ultimate challenge of distance education in terms of student support may be to personalise communications within systems which tend to promote impersonality. For effective communication, tutors and counsellors need to have some understanding of students' contexts. Presenting the results of an evaluation of group telephone tutorials conducted by Deakin University in 1988, Grace and Thompson (1989) note that:

Any communication is enhanced if the people concerned have a better understanding of one another's frame of reference. ... those tutors who make the effort to see their students as individuals and appreciate their circumstances establish a rich base for their teletutorials (Grace and Thompson, 1989, 37).

Thus effective student support, which implies communication and negotiation, entails not only the explication and interpretation of the culture of the campus, but also a cognitive appreciation by distance educators of the diverse worlds of their students. The value of the workplace as a validating context and source of peers, recipe knowledge and student support has been mentioned. Some innovative ways of increasing educational effectiveness by strengthening links to the workplace are already in operation, for example in Open Learning schemes (Paine, 1988; Thorpe and Grugeon, 1987). The relative social isolation of those not in the paid workforce should also be appreciated. Diversity in the student body calls for flexibility in the design and delivery of distance education rather than the uniformity implied in mass production.
8.2.3 Implications for epistemology and learning theory

The view of teaching and learning which the data presented in this thesis supports is humanistic in that it stresses the personal and affective aspects of learning, and is concerned with the personal development of the learner (Brookfield, 1986; Rogers, 1969; Mezirow, 1977; 1981; 1985). Such assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning are implicit in the discussion above as well as in the choice of research topic and methodology. Hermeneutic method essentially means listening for the message of the text, that is, the story being told. The interpretation of the students' stories which is offered includes both the idea of learning as a life-long development program, and the concept of agency. The students are presented as actively setting and pursuing their own goals in terms of life-long developmental agendas. My perception is that before enrolling, they had already assumed, either consciously or unconsciously, the responsibility for setting these goals and agendas, and had expectations of the distance education institutions as helpers or facilitators.

Having a research interest in students' stories is consistent with a definition of learning as a dialogue (Evans and Nation, 1989b), with Sewart's (1981) understanding of the student experience, with a theory of distance education as a guided didactic conversation (Holmberg, 1980), and with feminist epistemology and pedagogy, but is hardly consistent with the industrial model of distance education described by Peters (1971) except in the limited sense of market research.

The thesis argued here is that although characterised by certain features of industrial processes, distance education is nevertheless a social and cultural phenomenon, and the learning which takes place in this context is, in important respects, a social act. This concept is contradictory to that part of the conventional wisdom of distance educators which espouses the atomisation and rationalisation of educative tasks and which is supported and validated by learning theory which accepts and extols individualism. Baath (1982), for example, while expressing an interest in enhancing communication between campus and student, nevertheless maintains that distance education is essentially individualistic. Not only is the industrial model inadequate in that it cannot accommodate certain essential aspects of distance education; it is also dangerous in that, in so far as its influence is pervasive, reality comes to resemble the model.

Evans and Nation (1987; 1989a; 1989b) and Harris (1987) argue that the development of pedagogy in distance education is increasingly dominated by the rationalism and instrumentalism embedded in the processes of the production of knowledge. Identifying a kind of endemic alienation in the UK Open University system, Harris (1987)
maintains that social relationships in distance education systems are characterised not only by distance but by closure rather than openness. Promoting and elaborating the concept of dialogue as a pedagogic principle, Evans and Nation (1987; 1989b) critique the dominant mode of teaching as ‘instructional industrialism’.

In the industrial model, social and cultural phenomena tend to be either over-simplified or defined out of existence. As an example of the way in which impersonality becomes associated with this model, Nation (1983) quotes Keegan’s 1980 advice to course teams that the appropriate style of textual composition is one in which personality and idiosyncrasies are eliminated. Nation’s argument is the reverse: the isolating effects of distance should and can be counteracted by special efforts to personalise both formal and informal communications.

The image of the independent learner recurs in the learning theory espoused by distance educators, but it can too easily be associated with a concept of individualism which does not include agency. In such cases, ‘independence’ tends to be equated simply with isolation from other students or from an educational institution (Rowland, 1984), and an image of the student as passive receptacle is implied. Juler (1990) contends that the popular conception of education, and some educational practice is:

...dominated by metaphors implying some sort of one-way process such as the filling of a vessel, or the shaping of a material or as guiding someone on a journey (Juler, 1990, 24).

Freire (1972) refers to this as the banking model of education. Juler warns that constant use of such metaphors reinforces ‘instrumental views about education and mechanistic views about people’ (1990, 24), and contributes to the currency and influence of the industrial model in distance education.

Harris (1987) notes that the industrial reality of the consumer society which the model reflects is characterised by atomisation. The implications for relationships between teachers and learners in distance education are frightening and, according to Evans and Nation (1987; 1989a) and Harris (1987) already apparent. However, replying to Evans and Nation (1989a), Kinyanjui (1990) argues that:

On this issue, we should not underrate the abilities of adult learners to manage and self-direct their own learning. There is a limit to what extent a distance educator is in control of the learner. For instance, an indoctrination into particular thought or action is likely to be more effective in an institutionalised conventional education system than in a distance education system where learners are not removed from their social and
political milieu for long periods and, therefore, have more leeway for independent thought and reflection. Andragogical approaches inherent in distance education call for a recognition and encouragement of the learners’ capacity for self-direction which is, in itself, a recognition of their power to shape and control their own destinies (Kinyanjui, 1990, 78).

This study of students’ experiences tends to support Kinyanjui’s position. Although the students were disadvantaged by the fact that they were marginal members of the institutional culture, they cannot be characterised as passive victims of their marginal situation. Several instances have been given of the ways in which students chose to exercise some control over their relationships both with peers and with institutional personnel. Nor were the people in this sample uncritical consumers of the educational product. Indeed, some were professional educators who were conversant with learning theory and able to reflect on the models implicit in their own practice both as teachers and as learners.

However, the research findings are that seemingly contradictory consequences flow from the fact that students who have the capacity for agency encounter a system which represents the privatisation of institutional learning. Kaye and Matthew, who were both engaged in personal quests for meaning which they pursued with dedication and integrity, took advantage of the isolation afforded by off-campus study to preserve their privacy, even though they would have liked to develop meaningful relationships with academic staff. Their stories support Harris’s contention that:

It is possible for students to remain isolated in the system, and for some this is a most desirable option, helping them to avoid any of the risks of academic encounters. The system for its part has always been indifferent to the ‘private’ side of the OU student’s life, much as the uses to which products are put are of no concern to the manufacturer (Harris, 1987, 119).

The fact that the rich dimensions of meaning which some of the students brought to the experience of study were not adequately communicated constitutes a loss to both students and staff and to the overall quality of the educational experience. Mezirow (1977, 160) regards the identification and facilitation of transformation of meaning perspectives as ‘An unexplored educational function of enormous significance’.

Similar contradictory outcomes of attenuated communication were apparent in the gender issues raised by this study. Isolation protected the women from the full effects of some of the gendered and sexist practices which occur on the campus, although it did not protect them from the gendered construction of curriculum and pedagogy. By
privatising their study, the women had some power to define its meaning in their own terms, and providing that their meanings were not so discrepant as to prevent them gaining credit for courses, such privatisation could work well for them. However, in that the women's meanings had potential to enrich the kind of educational experience offered, isolation was a disadvantage because there were not adequate means for these meanings to be elicited or channels for their communication. The history of the women's movement is one of empowerment through consciousness raising in group interaction. By contributing to their social isolation, distance education can be disempowering for women. On the other hand, Women's Studies and other courses in which gender issues are recognised can provide isolated women with an alternative social context which can be empowering although dispersed.

In summary, the findings of this research challenge the validity of the industrial model, in that they emphasise the social dimensions of distance education and the capacity for agency of students. However, it is not suggested that any neatly defined model is available to replace the industrial metaphor. This is because, in terms of the communication of meaning, (both the meanings which structure the institutional culture and those which frame the students' personal contexts), the issues of agency, privatisation and community are fraught with ambiguity and paradox. A number of practitioners working within a critical and emancipatory paradigm have documented their frustrations in trying to encourage agency and create a sense of collegiate community among their off-campus students (Altrichter, 1990; Fitzclarence and Kemmis, 1989; Modra, 1989; 1991; Smythe, 1989). Significantly, all these practitioners are committed to change in education and society, and invite their students to participate in educational innovations which require substantial renegotiation of the definition of the educational situation.

In a more hopeful vein Burge (1988a) offers practical guidelines for distance educators based on her personal learner-centred model of education which is a development beyond Knowles's concept of andragogy. The model includes, on the part of the teaching staff, respect for learners as inherently proactive and responsible people, ability to recognise how task and social aspects of learning interact, and a willingness to share authority. Burge's guidelines emphasise connectedness and relationship in both interpersonal and cognitive dimensions of learning. She concludes:

We need not so much self-directed learning as self responsibility for learning. We need not so much to admire the independence of learners as we need to facilitate the interdependence of learners and the collaboration of educators. We need not so much to protect traditional roles and skills of educators as to develop more facilitative ones and expand our notions of professional responsibility (Burge, 1988a, 19).
The pervasive use of industrial processes both in practice and as metaphorical elements of theoretical models can be interpreted as a sign of the gendered construction of distance education. Rationality, analysis and atomisation, linear processes and individuality, the characteristic features of the industrial model, are those which have come to be recognised as archetypically masculine. Corresponding characteristics of the feminine archetype are intuitive understanding, integration, circularity and wholeness (Capra, 1983, 21). By highlighting the social aspects of learning, cultural analysis affirms the value of interaction, community and sense of belonging. Such an approach accords well with Gilligan's (1982) feminist deconstruction of developmental theory in which she maintains that the value given to individualism and autonomy is a male-centred construction which obscures the positive values of attachment and community which are understood by women.

Feminist theory and reported feminist practice in distance education contexts are a promising source of possible alternative metaphors. A common theme can be found in reports of special projects to encourage women to study in non-traditional areas (Heiler and Richards, 1988; Kirkup, 1988; Swarbrick, 1986; 1987); and in reports of practice by woman who teach Women's Studies courses (Burge and Lenskyj, 1990; Carl, Keough and Bourque, 1988; Cook, 1989; Cox and James, 1988). This theme is a commitment to the interactive, social dimension of learning.

In exploring the possibilities of developing an appropriate model for the education of women in the context of the constraints of distance education, Coulter (1989) quotes Belenky et al's (1986) use of a metaphor drawn from female experience, that of the teacher as midwife. The conclusion those researchers reached, having distilled the accounts of the 135 women interviewed, was that:

The kind of teacher they praised and the kind for which they yearned was one who would help them articulate and expand their latent knowledge; a midwife teacher. Midwife teachers are the opposite of banker-teachers. While bankers deposit knowledge in the learner's head, the midwives draw it out. They assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and clarifying it (Belenky et al., 1986, 217).

Specifically feminist models such as those mentioned above bear many similarities to good learner-centred practice such as that described by Burge (1988a); Lewis (1986) and Nation (1985). Burge and Lenskyj (1990) say that learner-centred and feminist pedagogies have in common:

...a comfortable, cooperative and respectful class climate; mutually negotiated learning objectives and activities; and validation of the learner's
personal experience as a resource for herself and others (Burge and Lenskyj, 1990, 24).

The distinctive features of feminist pedagogy are that it takes the specificity of women’s experience into account and has the explicit political agenda of the individual and collective emancipation of women.

It is not my intention to say that feminists should have some kind of monopoly over the articulation of alternatives to the industrial model, but rather that the direction away from that model, which I characterise as masculist, should be towards the feminist alternative. The contribution which this thesis has to make for distance educators who wish to move in this direction lies in the articulation of a concept of listening. The application of such a concept to learning theory is consistent with the philosophy which guides the author’s choice of research topic and methodology.

As Belenky and colleagues (1986) and Juler (1990) contend, the banking model implies one-way flow of knowledge between the teacher, who actively disseminates (i.e., scatters seed) and the student, who passively receives. By proposing that staff should listen to students I am making two modifications to this model. Firstly, applied to the role of the teacher, the word ‘listening’ carries the image of change of direction in the flow of information as well as change in the role of the teacher to include a receptive function. Secondly, the choice of the word ‘staff’ rather than ‘teacher’ implies that the communication is more than a one-to-one interaction between teacher and student. I am proposing that, in the sense that it is a community of people who perform different functions but share in the responsibility of transmitting the institutional culture, an educational institution as an entity is the recipient of messages from its off-campus students.

I am not alone in reaching the conclusion that cultivation of the ability to listen is the key to solving the dilemmas associated with the debates about interaction and independence. In a paper presented at a conference on study skills, in which she addresses this very issue, Rowland (1984) concludes:

If we ask ourselves which skills are needed to foster independent learning to help a student evolve his or her own goals, to develop nascent abilities and to share learning experiences, we are likely to come back to the supportive skills of questioning and listening and acting as a sounding board. Learning skills staff may have these attributes in abundance; so may subject teachers; and so might other students, particularly if encouraged to develop them (Rowland, 1984, 25).
Listening can occur in at least three ways. First, in the course of everyday institutional events, a variety of personnel acquire knowledge about students, especially if they cultivate a receptive attitude. This fact was apparent in the reactions of staff who attended seminars I gave in 1990 at the Gippsland Institute and at Deakin University in which I shared some of the results of my research into students' experiences. Those who attended worked in various capacities including as members of course teams, tutors, librarians, counsellors, student advisors and liaison officers. The discussion which took place during these seminars and afterwards in private conversations demonstrated that a wealth of knowledge about students existed in the institutions, but was not necessarily systematically generated or shared.

It is not suggested, however, that listening to off-campus students is unproblematic. Indeed, Modra (1989), a distance educator committed to a Freirean ideal of emancipatory pedagogy, reflects regretfully that distance education may be anti-dialogical 'almost by definition' (1989, 139). Noting that the effectiveness of Freire's emancipatory pedagogy depended on exhaustive research into students' cultural contexts, Modra asks:

I wonder, in relation to this, what is the 'setting' of distance education, when subjects such as those I taught have enrolments of over 100 students, very different people, scattered all over Australia? What 'cultural spade work' can educators do in such situations? What can students do? What might we not be able to accomplish together? (Modra, 1989, 140).

Modra's questions point to the second way in which a distance education institution can listen to its students, which is by conducting research. This may take the form of independent projects such as that on which this thesis is based, which can certainly claim to be a contribution to the 'cultural spade work' which is so necessary. Research and evaluation may also occur as part of, or in conjunction with, practice (Nation, 1985).

Unfortunately, the hierarchical and gendered nature of staff structures mitigates against the sharing of much valuable knowledge, since the people who have most direct contact with students are frequently those in junior positions such as tutors, library assistants, student advisors or liaison officers. There is an interesting gender dimension to this problem, since female employees are clustered in the lower levels of the hierarchy, many of them employed in such positions as those mentioned above. In institutional forums such as departmental meetings and staff seminars, the voices of junior staff and of women are less likely to be heard. Moreover, such people are less likely to be given the necessary time and resources to engage in those activities which would enable them to give their 'folk' knowledge the status of research findings.
The third way of ensuring that the voices of students are heard involves the radical redefinition of structures and practices. This study produced some evidence to support the contention that the imbalance of power in the traditional definition of the teacher/student relationship is the chief inhibitor of dialogue. The following two examples of successful listening provide insights into the effects of structural barriers. The first involves a tutor stepping out of the role of tutor and taking on that of student. In the second, the tutor stepped out of the world of the campus into a circumstance which resembled that of the students in its cultural isolation.

Miers (1984) describes how she gained an understanding of the student perspective and learned to become a listening tutor by taking the role of student while simultaneously employed as a staff tutor of the UK Open University. Reflecting on the disjunctions between staff and student perceptions, she comments:

I was intrigued but saddened to see how, firmly entrenched in our own disciplines, we as tutors do not even recognize the questions which may come from a different (student) perspective. So concerned are we to avoid silences, to appear knowledgable, to maintain control, that we forget how to listen...

The main lessons I learnt are not about how to do things differently as a tutor, although I have indeed shown ways in which my tutoring emphasis shall change. I learnt something about how it feels to be an adult student, about the frustrations and the difficulties, the sense of achievement, of isolation, the pleasure in student-tutor rapport... It was as an active student that I learnt the importance of mutual respect in tutor-student relationships, the extent to which students deserve that respect and the subtle ways in which it can be undermined (Miers, 1984, 104-105).

While working as an exchange fellow in a Chinese university, Cook (1989) continued to conduct an off-campus course which was part of a Women’s Studies major offered by the (then) South Australian College of Advanced Education. To her surprise, her Australian off-campus students responded to the situation by being both more communicative and more self-directed and autonomous. Reflecting on the experience, Cook concludes that it constituted a liberation from the prevailing definition of the teaching-learning situation:

By such an aberrant act as removing myself so dramatically from my institutional frame, I had signalled both my own power to self-direct, and the validity of my claims to accept self-direction from others (Cook, 1989, 36).
Cook finds it paradoxical that it was distance education which enabled this result, yet surely it is the very innovatory nature and capacity of distance education which gives it the potential to develop creative departures from the traditional.

**8.3 Extending the hermeneutic circle: final comment**

Hermeneutic understanding is inherently inconclusive, since it admits of polysemY, or multiple meanings, and because the circle of understanding is an ever-widening spiral which enlarges the investigator’s horizons. It is hoped, therefore, that the students’ stories told in the preceding chapters will resonate with the experience of those who work and study in distance education contexts in such a way as to promote and inform other processes of meaning construction. Rather than formulate conclusions, the author chooses to indicate the direction which the continuing spiral of understanding might take by repeating some of the questions raised by the students’ stories.

Can the educative process in distance education systems be dialogic? Are definitions and models of teaching and learning negotiable between the parties taking part in the educative process, and if so, by what means can these definitions be communicated and negotiated? Do the models and metaphors which currently influence the practice of distance education incorporate the concept of listening? How can academic staff, course developers, instructional designers and administrators receive and respond to feedback from their adult students? Are there adequate communication channels available in the milieux of distance education for such negotiations to take place? How can distance educators respond to the growing recognition of gender bias in the way knowledge is constructed and codified? Is it true to say that despite the many personal gains experienced by women who return to study, the practice of distance education serves to reconstruct the silence of women and the exclusion of their meanings from the production of knowledge?
Dear

I am a post-graduate student in Distance Education at Deakin University, and I am interested in studying the experience of learning from the point of view of off-campus students. I am writing to invite your participation in a research project which will form the basis of my doctoral thesis.

I am looking for about fifteen people who would be interested in sharing with me certain aspects of their experience in the first year of their enrolment as external, or off-campus students. Basically the research will involve a series of in-depth interviews. I anticipate that I would need to visit you up to five times over a period of fifteen months beginning in January, 1988. Each interview would take about two hours of your time.

The basis of my selection of possible participants from the many people who have been offered a place in an off-campus program in Victoria in 1988 is quite simple. I have selected people who will not be too difficult for me to visit and have looked for some variety in the group.

As soon as I have received, from Gippsland Institute, your agreement to participate I will contact you by telephone.

If you have any queries regarding the project before you decide whether to agree to participate, I may be contacted during office hours on (052) 471241.

Yours sincerely,

Signature Redacted by Library

Margaret Shapcott.
3 December 1987

Dear

Our records indicate that you have accepted an offer of a place in a course at Gippsland Institute for 1988 as an external student.

I write asking for your assistance with a research project being conducted by Margaret Shapcott, a staff member at Deakin University. She is seeking a small number of new external students from both Deakin University and Gippsland Institute. Further details of her project are outlined in her accompanying letter.

We believe that Margaret's project will provide valuable information for both institutions and are pleased to assist her. Consistent with our policy of confidentiality of our student records, I am first seeking your permission to put your name into a small pool of our new external students from which Margaret will select her final sample.

If you are agreeable to participating in this project please complete the enclosed sheet and return to me as soon as possible in the enclosed envelope.

Thank you for your consideration of this request and, if you agree to participate, for your cooperation.

Yours sincerely

Signature Redacted by Library

John Evans
Head
External Studies

cc: Registrar
Dear

I am a post-graduate student in Distance Education at Deakin University, and I am interested in studying the experience of learning from the point of view of off-campus students. I am writing to invite your participation in a research project which will form the basis of my doctoral thesis.

I am looking for about fifteen people who would be interested in sharing with me certain aspects of their experience in the first year of their enrolment as external, or off-campus students. Basically the research will involve a series of in-depth interviews. I anticipate that I would need to visit you up to five times over a period of fifteen months beginning in January, 1988. Each interview would take about two hours of your time.

The basis of my selection of possible participants from the many people who have been offered a place in an off-campus program in Victoria in 1988 is quite simple. I have selected people who will not be too difficult for me to visit and have looked for some variety in the group. Access to the University’s records for this purpose has been approved by both the Student Centre and the Student Association Council.

I will contact you by telephone in the near future to ascertain if you would like to be in the program. Alternatively, if you have any queries regarding the project before you decide whether to agree to participate, I may be contacted during office hours on (052) 471241 and at home on (052) 443359. Could you also advise me if there are any alterations to be made to your personal details as given at the head of this letter?

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Shepcott.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview No. 2</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. Context</strong></td>
<td><strong>II. Analysis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative data gathered from interviews.</td>
<td>Analysis of experiences shared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational background and professional experiences.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with institutions.</td>
<td>Examination of educational experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural knowledge and familiarity.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Advertising time and context.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional consideration.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social and political context.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>III. Findings</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence in new ideas and the implementation of new ideas.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed communication patterns and relationships.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed learning environments.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common language and cultural understanding.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>あなたが指摘したような新しい考えはどのように受け入れますか？</td>
<td>What is the reception of new ideas?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>参加者の意見にどのように反応しますか？</td>
<td>How do you respond to participants' opinions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV. Discussion</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in learning environments and communication patterns.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolution of ideas and concepts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for new ideas.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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**Note:** The text is a mix of Japanese and English, with a focus on educational and cultural contexts.
Off campus enrolment by age and sex
Deakin University and Gippsland Institute 1989

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>17-20 M</th>
<th>17-20 F</th>
<th>21-30 M</th>
<th>21-30 F</th>
<th>31-40 M</th>
<th>31-40 F</th>
<th>41-50 M</th>
<th>41-50 F</th>
<th>51-60 M</th>
<th>51-60 F</th>
<th>61+ M</th>
<th>61+ F</th>
<th>Total M</th>
<th>Total F</th>
<th>Grand Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Deakin University</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>725</td>
<td>921</td>
<td>1127</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>2786</td>
<td>4682</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gippsland Institute</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1170</td>
<td>1412</td>
<td>2582</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**LEGEND**
- Deakin University: M ———— F ————
- Gippsland Institute: M ———— F ————
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217


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