

## A LIFELONG PASSION FOR DISTANCE LEARNING: NORINE WARK

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Received: 18.09.2023

Accepted: 25.09.2023

### ABSTRACT

Dr. Norine Wark is an award-winning scholar, educator, researcher, and writer in the field of open, digital, and distance education. Coauthor (with Dr. Susan Bainbridge) of the groundbreaking *Encyclopedia of Female Pioneers in Online Learning*, as well as numerous other academic publications, she is a recipient of the prestigious Governor General of Canada Gold Medal Award for Academic Excellence (the highest award for a graduate student in Canada).

Distance learning is more than an academic focus for Dr. Wark: it is a lifelong passion and an integral part of her life since the earliest days of her childhood. As a learner, teacher, researcher, mentor, and scholar, Dr. Wark's commitment to excellence in open, digital, and distance education is unparalleled.

This biographical paper explores Dr. Wark's life and career, with a focus on her relationship to distance learning and her contributions to the field. It briefly reviews her early and later childhood, the foundations of her teaching career, and explores her graduate and postgraduate work in the field of open, digital, and distance education.

**Keywords:** Women researchers, distance education, educational technology, online learning, digital education, ODDE, Norine Wark

### INTRODUCTION

Dr. Norine Wark is a multiple award-winning scholar, educator, researcher, and writer. Coauthor (with Dr. Susan Bainbridge) of the groundbreaking *Encyclopedia of Female Pioneers in Online Learning*, as well as author and coauthor of numerous other academic publications, she is a recipient of the prestigious Governor General of Canada Gold Medal Award for Academic Excellence (the highest award for a graduate student in Canada).

Norine's<sup>1</sup> research focuses on historic and emerging theory and practice in distance learning, as well as the technologies that enable such learning. Distance learning is more than an academic focus for Norine: it has been an integral part of her life since her early childhood.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Wark is referred to by her first name, Norine, throughout this article. The authors wish to acknowledge that female academics are less likely to be referred to by their title and surname than their male counterparts, a phenomenon known as "untitling" that has been attributed to sexism, misogyny, and a persistent undervaluation of women's expertise (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2021; Ro, 2021; Shurchkov, 2021). Nonetheless, Dr. Wark has expressed a preference for her first name to be used within this biographical article.

This paper explores Norine's life and career, with a focus on her relationship to distance learning and her contributions to the field.

### **EARLY CHILDHOOD: INTRODUCTION TO DISTANCE LEARNING**

Norine's earliest encounter with formal education began at her kitchen table, lit by a kerosene lamp, when she opened a manila envelope that contained her very first distance learning package (Athabasca University [AU], 2019b). Norine and her family lived in an isolated line shack in the northern Rocky Mountains in a remote part of British Columbia—so remote that the manila envelope arrived from a post office box more than 300 kilometers away, over rivers that could only be crossed when the water was either low enough or frozen (AU, 2019c). With no school for hundreds of kilometers, she and her siblings studied at a distance with the support of the province's centralized Correspondence Education Branch and under the guidance of their mother (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023; Winkelmanns et al., 2010). The distance learning curriculum enabled Norine to discover the wonders of the wider world, far beyond her wilderness home (AU, 2019b).

Despite her family's remote location, Norine recalls an early childhood filled with numerous opportunities to learn, and her natural curiosity led her to eagerly engage. "For me, it's always been new learning," she says. "I like something until I master it." Once she learned to read at the age of four, she fell in love with the magic of books, an endless source of new discoveries. Learning about survival in the remote north was also a necessity, including everything from how to keep warm and clean with no electricity or running water to how to survive a trip to the outdoor privy in -50°C temperatures. Norine learned how to garden, fish, hunt, butcher, harvest wild plants and berries, cook, bake, preserve, and can, as well as how to chop the wood used for cooking and heating (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

Norine's father, a truck driver, was away from home for up to three months at a time, but when he arrived, he would bring the precious manila envelopes from the post office box with him. Time to read and to learn was a luxury in an environment where subsistence and survival consumed the vast majority of time (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023). Still, Norine completed her Grade 1 curriculum in only six months and delighted in the control she had over her own education (AU, 2019b).

Shortly after completing her Grade 1 curriculum, Norine's life changed radically. The family home was located within the 350,000 forest acres that comprised the flood zone for a new hydroelectric dam (Loo, 2007). With the project a year ahead of schedule, residents were notified by mail that the flooding would go ahead; Norine's family received the notification almost too late. Abandoning their home and garden, they packed all their belongings onto two flatbed trailers and fled to safety (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

### **LATER CHILDHOOD: ADJUSTING TO IN-PERSON SCHOOLING**

Norine's family resettled on farmland in a rural area on the Alberta prairies, an environment entirely foreign to Norine. Although she was now able to attend school in person, she found it difficult to adjust to the regimented structure of public school in Alberta after the freedom of learning at home. For Norine, the tangle of rules and schedules created an atmosphere of rigid inflexibility rather than enhancing her natural curiosity and excitement in learning. This experience reinforced Norine's conviction that all learners at all levels need to find their own "north star," or motivation and goals for learning (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

Norine's family eventually returned to northern British Columbia to settle in the small community of Moberly Lake. Public schooling in Chetwynd, the closest village, contrasted sharply with the rigid system in Alberta. Students behaved disrespectfully and teachers

struggled to manage the classroom. Bullying and fighting were rampant in classes, hallways, and bathrooms, and on the school grounds (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

Despite the challenging environment, Norine excelled academically. Although Chetwynd's tiny high school did not offer all of the academic prerequisites for university entrance, Norine gratefully reconnected with the province's Correspondence Education Branch and graduated with all of the required prerequisites for university entrance, along with numerous awards for academic excellence—including a university scholarship award for an essay and oral presentation about two proposed hydroelectric dams. She also received trophies and prizes for sewing and art, twin passions that continued throughout her adult life (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

#### **EARLY ADULTHOOD: MARRIAGE AND UNIVERSITY**

Following her family's wishes and the common practice in northern British Columbia at the time, Norine married early, at the age of 19. Two years later, in 1981, her first child came: a son, Adam. A daughter, Carlyn, was born in 1985 (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

As a young wife and mother, Norine ran two part-time businesses: she offered accounting services to local businesses and individuals, and she ran a clothing design and sewing business. The design business blossomed: within a few years, she had a downtown storefront and employed two seamstresses. Her reach extended far beyond Chetwynd: she travelled and showed her designs at national and international fashion shows, and even met up-and-coming designer Vera Wang, who is now one of the world's most prominent fashion designers, particularly known for her formal gowns and wedding dresses (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

Despite these successes, Norine's marriage was unhappy and came to an end shortly after Carlyn's birth. A second daughter, Andrea, was born in 1987 after the marriage had ended. With three young children under the age of 5 and a business that—while thriving—was not profitable enough to support her family, Norine returned to university to become a teacher (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

Pursuing teacher education as a young single mother living in northern British Columbia in the 1980s was not an easy task. A small college located 100 kilometers away offered a program in partnership with Simon Fraser University (SFU); for two and a half years, Norine made the 100-kilometer drive every weekday to attend classes. She also attended a summer session at SFU's main campus, over 1000 kilometers away in Burnaby, British Columbia. Instrumental to the completion of Norine's training, however, was extensive distance education: through print, audiovisual, television, and teleconferencing technologies, Norine completed course after course. The experience was exceptional:

Distance education packages were well-designed, content-rich and, for the most part, enabled self-pacing. There was time to investigate, to reflect, to imagine, and to explore outside the box. I had to work much harder in the distance courses. I believe that learning at a distance molded me into an insatiable, self-determined learner. (AU, 2019c)

Norine survived economically with a combination of student loans, her part-time income as a designer/seamstress/tailor, and scholarship funds. Her high GPA meant her tuition fees were waived, which helped tremendously (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

After completing her teaching diploma in 1991, Norine was awarded a Bachelor of Education degree in 1997, with minors in environmental studies, criminology, and psychology. Throughout this early stage of her academic career, she achieved academic excellence, earning numerous awards and scholarships from Northern Lights College and SFU, including the coveted SFU Dean's Award for Academic Excellence (Wark, 2023a).

## TEACHING CAREER

In 1991, Norine embarked on her teaching career at Windrem Elementary School in Chetwynd, which she had attended as a child. She later transferred to Crescent Park Elementary School in Dawson Creek, British Columbia, and then moved to Central Middle School, also in Dawson Creek (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

During the early years of her teaching career, British Columbia's Ministry of Education introduced a new curriculum, shifting from the traditional teacher-centred paradigm to a learner-centered curriculum and assessment approach. During this shift, Norine saw firsthand how students' learning and motivation improved as they took greater control over their own learning. "When children took control of their learning, they just blossomed," she says. As a teacher, she strived to connect learning inside and outside of the classroom, providing opportunities for her students to participate in environmental awareness and stewardship activities, as well as in community service. She embraced project-based learning, initiating collaboration with other teachers to plan, design, and implement cross-curricular projects. For example, she collaborated with three other teachers to plan a year-long integrated, thematic unit on BC history, incorporating literature, math, history, and geography, culminating in weeklong trip for 117 children to Barkerville, a Canadian National Historic Site (Barkerville Historic Town & Park, n.d.; N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

She rose to the rank of master teacher within the district, and was the founding member of local numeracy and literacy committees, as well as an active member of her district's science and environmental education committees (Wark, 2023a). Among other services, these committees helped revise the existing British Columbia Ministry of Education curriculum. Soon Norine was traveling around the province and advising the Ministry on student portfolios, group learning, and other educational strategies. During her travels, she also began to realize just how disconnected teachers were from each other, not only in their own schools and districts, but between districts (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

Moving from the classroom in 1998, Norine became a learning assistance teacher for students two or more years above or below grade level, with diverse physical, emotional, social, cognitive and/or behavioral needs and abilities (Wark, 2023a). In this role, she created several web-based courses for learners who were unable to attend face-to-face classes. As she worked to create these courses, Norine decided to pursue additional formal education to develop her distance education, research, and writing skills. She believed that this would help improve student learning, as well as teacher-teacher, teacher-administrator, and teacher-Ministry communication, interaction, and understanding (AU, 2019c; N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

## GRADUATE EDUCATION

After careful research into the options, Norine embarked on a Master of Distance Education degree, which she earned studying at a distance through Athabasca University. She continued to teach in the public education system and raise her family as she completed her graduate work; she was awarded the degree in 2003. The educational experience through Athabasca University was so positive that Norine chose to pursue her Doctor of

Education in Distance Education through the same university (N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

Norine's doctoral studies stemmed from her desire to support learners in regaining their natural curiosity and drive to learn, as well as enabling them to become "masters and directors" of their own learning (AU, 2019b). Her dissertation was a pioneering study that employed a novel mixed-methods methodology. *Shifting Paradigms: A Critical Pragmatic Evaluation of Key Factors Affecting Learner Empowered Emergent Technology Integration* (Wark, 2018) provided an in-depth look at online graduate learners' use of 16 emergent technologies. Using a critical pragmatic lens, she designed a paradigm shift framework, paradigm shift model, and an emergent technology taxonomy, adaptable to any learning context or environment, to facilitate teaching and learning in a rapidly changing world (Wark, 2018).

She has since published extensively on this topic, including a book chapter and international journal articles, as well as delivering international conference presentations (see Appendix for complete list of publications). A forthcoming book expands upon and extends her dissertation (Wark, 2023b). One of her papers was a Best Paper Award finalist at the International Council on Distance Education (ICDE) World Conference on Online Learning (Wark, 2023a).

During her doctoral journey, Norine not only pursued her own research but also collaborated with academics around the world on 14 major research projects, resulting in numerous other international peer-reviewed presentations and publications (see Appendix). Together with Dr. Mohamed Ally, Chair of her dissertation committee, Norine published extensively in the areas of mobile learning, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence (e.g., Ally & Wark, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018). One coauthored publication received the Best Paper award at the 17th World Conference on Mobile and Contextual Learning, while another was awarded 8th place at the European Distance Education Network Research Workshop in Leuven, Belgium (Wark, 2023a).

Norine completed her Doctor of Education degree in 2018 and was honored with the Governor General of Canada Gold Medal Award for Academic Excellence at Convocation 2019 (AU, 2019c). In addition, she received AU's Doctor of Education Convocation Scholarship (AU, 2019a). As the university's top graduating student, Norine was invited to address the convocation assembly. Her inspiring speech highlighted her passion and commitment for distance education and, in a characteristic fashion, encouraged Athabasca University's graduates to go out and change the world (AU, 2019c).

Norine's now-adult children (Adam, Andrea, and Carlyn) and her second husband (Jack) were present at her convocation. They are pictured below, with Norine and Dr. Mohamed Ally.



2019 Athabasca University Convocation. From left to right: Adam, Andrea, Carlyn, Dr. Mohamed Ally, Norine, and Jack

## POSTDOCTORAL CAREER

Norine has continued to pursue numerous innovative projects since completion of her doctoral degree.

In collaboration with Dr. Susan Bainbridge, she researched and wrote *The Encyclopedia of Female Pioneers in Online Learning* (Bainbridge & Wark, 2023), which was recently published by Routledge. In preparation for this work, Norine and Susan<sup>2</sup> identified and interviewed 30 female academics whose work in online learning was far ahead of its time; for example, Starr Roxanne Hiltz created the world's first fully functional online learning management system, or "virtual classroom," and implemented it with a full-scale field trial in 1986 (Bainbridge & Wark, 2023). The encyclopedia is a monumental achievement, highlighting the accomplishments of numerous female pioneers whose work has been systematically under-recognized in the field; it has been described as a "rich and rewarding read" (Janes, 2022, p. 3) and a "fascinating compilation," (Nyangara, 2023, para. 1) whose readers "will find the individual stories as inspiration to change the world of distance and online learning for the better" (Parhar, 2023, p. 109). Together, Norine and Susan are working with several graduate students and other collaborators to explore these pioneering female academics further, with a particular focus on mitigating the *Matilda Effect*, a term coined by Rossiter (1993) to describe the systematic under-recognition of women's work in technical and scientific fields, which Norine and her collaborators theorize extends to the field of distance education (Bainbridge & Wark, 2023; Schmidt et al., 2021).

In celebration of International Women's Day 2023, Norine and Susan provided a keynote address to the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand and the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia, highlighting the evolution of their research and the pioneers' shared passion for social justice (Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Bainbridge is referred to by her first name, Susan, to honour Dr. Wark's previously discussed preference within this article. Once again, the authors wish to acknowledge the phenomenon of "untitling" for female academics (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2021; Ro, 2021; Shurchkov, 2021).

Norine has numerous other manuscripts in preparation, including journal articles, a two-volume autobiography, and two handbooks. She takes an active role in coaching and supporting graduate and postgraduate students in the field of distance education and remains closely connected to Athabasca University. She provides international volunteer services within the distance learning community (including peer review for two international journals in the field) and is a founding member, vice president, and treasurer of the budding international nonprofit organization, 21st Century Association for Lifelong Learning (<https://2stCALLing.net>; N. Wark, personal communication, August 22, 2023).

## LOOKING AHEAD

Norine's future plans include academic research, writing, and presentations, particularly in the areas of historic and emerging theory and practice in distance learning, as well as the technologies that enable such learning. She will continue to support graduate and postgraduate students in their academic journeys and to contribute to international nonprofit organizations aiming to improve education for all.

"Education is power," Norine says. "And education is for everyone." Her own life history perfectly illustrates these principles. For Norine, enabling and empowering learners to take control of their lives and their learning is a never-ending delight.

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**Debbie LACARTE**, BGS, MEd, is a retired primary teacher. Norine Wark was her sponsor teacher during her last teaching practicum. Debbie is currently authoring her first fiction novel (untitled) and is compiling a handbook, *Read Write Now*, in which she shares her knowledge and love of teaching beginning reading and writing. She lives with her husband of twenty years, Peter Shaw, in Dawson Creek, BC. She enjoys spending time reading, crocheting, and keeping in close touch with family and friends.

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**APPENDIX: PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS**

- Wark, N. (2023). *An interview with the indomitable Lisa Marie Blaschke: Champion of heutagogy (self-determined learning)* [Manuscript submitted for publication].
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