Paper 7:

Geekgirls or Cybersisters? Constructing Feminist Spaces for Learning in Cyberspace

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Summary

- This paper draws on action research exploring the introduction of networked learning into a Women's Studies degree programme. The paper describes how examples of materials were developed for the course web-site and considers whether or not the Internet can be a feminist space for learning. Accounts of the feminist frameworks which have informed the Women's Studies learning and teaching are provided, along with two competing stories about women's access and experiences of computer mediated communications for learning, and continuing personal and professional development. The location and perceptions of the students within these debates are discussed, as well as the extent to which the web-based framework has encouraged students to explore the Internet for themselves, and begin to weave and spin their own stories. What this has meant for the learners is explored. Have they become geekgirls or do they see the Internet as a way of linking with other cybersisters? The paper concludes that on-line learning may help to empower this particular group, as long as it encourages them to become self directed learners. There is evidence that not only does it provide access to resources, it also becomes a repository for feminist materials that might otherwise be lost or difficult to trace, and it offers a means of communicating and extending feminist activity and debate both locally and globally, in the context of learning new skills and identities.

Introduction and Background

- The stimulus for the action research that has informed this paper has been two-fold. Firstly, the professional development associated with the Dearne Valley Higher Education Networked Learning project. This has had the objective of developing higher education as part of the economic regeneration of the Dearne Valley, an area near to Sheffield that has experienced severe deprivation following the demise of traditional industries such as coal mining and steel manufacturing. Secondly, as Programme Director for Women's Studies in the Division of Adult Continuing Education in the University of Sheffield, I have become interested in the potential for computer supported networked learning (CSNL) to be used to support geographically dispersed part-time students who may wish to study in their own localities, and who may find it difficult to find time for synchronous contact with each other and the tutors outside of the present face to face class time.

The wider context of debates on learning and teaching have also promoted the use of new communications and information technology to the extent that the Internet seems to be ubiquitous in higher education, and the skills associated with this have been identified as essential key outcomes for graduates (Dearing, 1997). Information technology skills have become a new form of literacy, and in many institutions they are a pre-requisite for using the library catalogue. Nevertheless, this context, in which much computer supported networked learning is being developed, is far from gender free. Access issues continue to be of concern because the availability of the technology, and the skills to make use of it, are not yet universal, and so institutions may need to take responsibility for such access to ensure equity. For example, recent surveys of personal computer ownership, usage and access to the Internet show a continuing story of differentiation by gender, age, social class and occupation, which reinforces the notion that IT has been dominated by the young, the rich, and men (DTI, 1996; GVU Center's third WWW User Survey, 1995; Kirkup, forthcoming,). Yet the plethora of funded educational initiatives in this field (of which this action research is a part) suggest consid-

erable expectations surround the development of these communications and information technologies (HEFCE, 1996; Women on the Web, 1997). However, there remains a question about whether these activities merely reflect current 'hype' about the information superhighway or whether they will enable the development of new forms of communications that will encourage accessible and equitable learning opportunities. In other words as Ebben and Kramarae (1993:1) pose will women be "creating a cyberspace of our own" or will we find as Spender (1995:193) argues, "the only difference between the real world and the virtual [is that] if anything, the male domination of cyberspace is worse!"

Women's experiences of cyberspace: the competing stories

"Web based learning would have some very positive aspects, particularly for Women's Studies. Being able to communicate on a national and maybe international basis with other women would inevitably increase one's knowledge of the experiences of women from very different political, social and cultural backgrounds...One could make links with feminist organisations which are actively seeking to eliminate sexist oppression, build up relationships with groups and organisations one would not come into contact with during a regular course"

Isobel, (Women's Studies student)

"Direct communication is a vital element for Women's Studies as far as I am concerned...The lack of unspoken communication or body language would be a main drawback to discussion involving the Internet/email...although it could be with someone you know, lack of physical proximity would make it difficult. Talking with other students you didn't

know would either make a false familiarity or a stand-offishness exemplified by academic language (and all political correctness)."

Teresa, (Women's Studies student)

Two different and conflicting versions of women's experiences of cyberspace can be identified in these extracts from one of the focus group discussions conducted for the action research which informs this paper. The first view is optimistic and the second is more pessimistic, although in some senses they reflect opposite ends of a continuum, and they echo the dichotomies of the literature about the Internet. On the one hand there is a story about the Internet that shows it as a liberatory and empowering technology, in which its origins in military technology and the political strategies of powerful nations have played a part in the diffusion of centres of control and regulation. The way is open for the creation of global communities that could recapture the spirit and efficacy of traditional societies (Rheingold, 1994). Feminists such as Donna Haraway, Sadie Plant and Sherry Turkle have developed these ideas, and emphasised the radical possibilities for women posed by the fluidity and construction of multiple identities through computer mediated communications, and they have valued the anarchic tendencies of the Internet to undermine existing power structures. Turkle (1995) has suggested that the medium encourages a bottom-up or a more intuitive approach to learning, what she calls 'soft mastery' or 'bricolage' which she regards as more in line with a female style of interacting (and here she is influenced by Belenky et al, 1986, who argued that there are distinct women's ways of knowing). At the most positive end of this continuum of stories is the so called cyberfeminist Sadie Plant (1996, 1997) who sees opportunities to dissolve all forms of identity online, and who has sought to rectify women's invisibility by celebrating women's contribution to the construction of the computers and the Internet. Haraway (1991) similarly does not see a basis for conflict between machines and people but rather advocates that we become 'cyborgs'.

Many of these optimistic arguments are grounded in feminist theories and parallel the discourses of feminist pedagogy. This is because they focus on

the experiences of women and challenge received knowledge, in order to "move away from the acceptance of disciplinary knowledge as objective, impartial, and neutrally discovered" (Kramarae and Spender, 1993:1). From the outset such challenges have had political and transformative overtones, and so one concern for feminist teachers like myself working to develop a Women's Studies curriculum within formal education institutions has been whether or not the Internet can create a space for women as well as increasing our knowledge about women. Within the traditional face to face classroom this has commonly been termed "finding a voice", "claiming a space for ourselves" or "rendering women visible" (Madoc-Jones and Coates, 1996:3). Within this feminist pedagogy women's experiences have been valued as resources for learning, and as a consequence learning through critical reflection about the diversity of women's experiences has been central, and intrinsically bound up with the development of their agency to change their lives.

There is evidence that where CSNL has been introduced with financial and structural support to ensure local access points (as in this Dearne Valley action research project), girls and women have made positive use of the technology, and begun to shape their own knowledge and resources. For example, Spender (1995:110) described the case of the Methodist Ladies College, Melbourne, in which in an all girls' school the electronic classroom has encouraged student centred learning. Similarly, Kaplan and Farrell (1994) found that once women became computer competent they enjoyed chatting on their email and bulletin boards. However, the educational profiles and the learning contexts of these young students are very different from those of the adult women returning to learn part-time in the project area of South Yorkshire and North Derbyshire, which is economically deprived and has little history of educational participation beyond compulsory schooling. Not surprisingly therefore, nearly one third of the students in the focus groups and email training session discussions expressed "disinterest, annoyance and fear" at the idea of Internet based learning.

A number of these students were in part aligning themselves with the view that the Internet is an anathema to feminist principles and practices, and they stressed the need for the following:

"It is important that the Web site 'voice' is not seen as being in charge of the subject and directing what needs to be discussed. It would not be feminist to maintain there is one feminist perspective or a hierarchy of acceptable perspectives." Teresa, (Women's Studies student). This more pessimistic story highlights and supports a perception of the male construction and dominance of the technology, and the lack of public and free access which affects women disproportionately (Balka, 1993). Other features of this story concern the problems associated with sexual harassment, pornography, and gender swapping that may discourage women's participation (Shade, 1993; Spender, 1995), and so the liberatory possibilities of computer mediated communications (CMC) are uncertain. Further support for this story about women's low participation on the Internet draws on the well documented differences in the communication styles of women and men off-line (Tannen, 1991). Similar differences have been identified in on-line discussion groups where men have been shown to dominate on-line postings and been more likely to use 'report' talk, while women have been shown to use more 'rapport' talk (Herring, 1994; Ferris, 1996; Pohl and Michaelson, 1998).

However, somewhere between these competing stories is a third position which draws some comfort from the increasingly complex literature about CMC, and suggests that there are some positive benefits for women involved in computer networking. Much of the early literature on CMC suggested that the lack of social cues promoted social equality (Kiesler, 1987; Sproull and Kiesler, 1993). This expectation has been supported in part by other studies on mixed discussion groups (Hardy et al, 1994; McConnell, 1997; Selfe and Meyer, 1991). Sproull and Kiesler (1993) have suggested that the communications technology with its plain text format and the perceived ephemeralness of its messages, has led people to forget or ignore their audiences. They have suggested that the medium contributes to deindividuation which means that the users of CMC become less sensitive to each other, and the result of this reduced social awareness is that they may send messages which ignore social boundaries, involve greater levels of social revelation than in face to face encounters, and they are more likely to 'speak' bluntly and write 'flaming' messages. The conclusions they drew were that organisations should develop guidelines and codes of conduct for CMC, and their work is a useful reminder that CMC operates in a social context which appears to be devoid of clues about the social structure and position of participants. This analysis, whilst providing some evidence for the role of CMC in promoting social equity, also helps to explain why a number of other writers have suggested that CMC does little to equalise differences in gendered communications, and may exacerbate some differences, even though some women's voices are increasingly being heard (Ferris, 1996; Herring, 1994; Pohl and Michaelson, 1998; We, 1993).

As a consequence, I have been concerned that any web based Women's Studies learning framework finds ways of adding in social process cues so that users can contextualise each others' contributions. In one of the focus groups the concept of 'trust' was identified as critical for enabling women to share experiences and ask naive questions, and students proposed that strategies such as social talk or 'chit-chat', and the development of a verbal contract, which are used to facilitate trust in face to face classes, should be replicated in on-line discussion groups. This could be done by encouraging contributors to introduce themselves, and developing 'ground rules' or netiquette. In spite of this though, one of the first proposals from two students (one on-line and one in a focus group discussion) which has quickly been taken up by others on-line, is that they would like to arrange to meet in a real time and place.

On-line communications: social Constructs, Socially Negotiated

"It's possible that some women may feel able to be more forthcoming with 'radical' viewpoints from the safety of the web site. There have been occasions where I have felt unable to say precisely what I wanted to say because I was unsure of the reaction of others students and lecturers, not what they may say in return but what they would not say.

From behind the computer screen it may have been easier to be very straight forward."

Isobel, (Women's Studies student)

One key issue which underpins concerns about CMC is the extent to which there are similarities and differences between CMC and face to face conversations. For example, Perrolle (1991) argued that because some of the social norms of communications are removed or obscured in CMC, such as how we build trust and develop linguistic competence, there is the potential for distortion in these communications. She also acknowledged that some social indicators of power and status differences which can negatively affect people's participation in face to face conversations can be hidden in CMC, and so there is a greater potential for more equal participation by each gender, class, race and ability group, and the student Isobel agreed with this when she said,

"I sometimes felt isolated being the only black woman on the course, and would have appreciated another black women to talk to...through the network and email one can develop very positive support networks with women of the same cultural background etc..."

Overall though Perrolle (1991) has suggested caution in assuming that the technology will always be deployed in such emancipatory ways and that the effects of social negotiation in communications may even reify unequal relations of power and authority. In other words, there is a need to recognise that all media of communications are social constructs and that the interaction which results will be socially negotiated.

A second theme in the networked learning literature is that CMC facilitates a more collaborative form of teaching and learning. For example, Paulsen (1994) identified four distinct pedagogical paradigms operating within CMC, from the one to one to the many to many, and he argued that the pedagogical techniques of many to many are more effective when conducted through computer conferencing than when used in face to face situations.

However, many of the occurrences that Paulsen quoted involved well qualified learners and professional practitioners but he offered little discussion of how learners' previous educational achievement might have contributed to the success of the many to many CMC techniques. Thus whilst I have found his typology useful in identifying the relationship between different CMC structures and the processes of learning, I am cautious about the expectation that computer conferencing, debate, role play and other group simulations are likely to be more effective in their CMC form, rather than their face to face versions, with the alternative students enrolling on Women's Studies courses in the Dearne and elsewhere, who have not traditionally participated in higher education.

Nevertheless, increasingly there is evidence that Women's Studies courses are finding that the one to many and many to many approaches to learning and teaching using computer bulletin boards, email discussion lists and computer conferencing, have enhanced the learning of women students within a framework of feminist pedagogy (see for example, Alice, 1996; Hardin and Pramaggiore, 1996; O'Hare and Kahn, 1996). For example, McCulley and Patterson, (1996) suggested that the use of email within the Women and Power in American Politics course at the University of Richmond, USA, encouraged feminist empowerment because it "offers a kinder, less intimidating environment for less aggressive students to network not only with each other, but with politically engaged others at the grassroots" (1996), and it reduced isolation, enabled exchange of ideas from many points of view, across the boundaries of gender, 'race' and culture, and enabled participation from home.

Constructing feminist spaces for learning

- For many students, joining the Women's Studies courses within the University of Sheffield is often their first exposure to an explicitly feminist focus and so a crucial element in the pedagogical approach is the exploration through reflection of students' own beliefs and values, and a comparison of these attitudes with those of others in the class. In designing CSNL it seemed critical therefore to

consider students' expectations and levels of satisfaction with existing face to face classes as well as exploring the potential of CSNL to meet their needs. Four focus groups were undertaken as part of the action research to identify these concerns and further interviews conducted with tutors and students. These discussions revealed a high level of satisfaction with existing provision (which supported other evidence from student evaluations, external examiners' reports, and the internal teaching quality review (Webb, 1998). However, the discussions also identified some dilemmas associated with the frustratingly limited time that part-time students had for exploring challenging personal and political questions with each other, and the ways in which the focus on academic success restricted the possibilities that the classes could become the springboards for political activism and connections with a 'women's movement'. The conclusions drawn were that the web course designers should choose to use a closed email discussion list and web-site, not simply to distribute further information and instructional material, but to enhance the discussion of sensitive feminist topics. In addition, the practice of learning this way would provide access to new technology skills by encouraging women to become more familiar with these, and it would open up new resources. So far, an email discussion list has been set up for the class members and tutors based at three sites across Sheffield, North Derbyshire and South Yorkshire; also a web site, with general course information, a taster module and one level two module on Feminist Theory, is under construction, using a checklist for development devised and agreed through the focus groups' discussions (see appendix 1).

Among students and tutors, no previous computer experience has been expected, and guidance and practice on how to operate electronic mail have been given by non specialists, who have been Women's Studies tutors in the main, and in some cases existing students, and so extending the principle of sharing competence and expertise. The web based resources have been structured so that potential students can learn from other students' experiences and share their own experiences because this has been an important element in the Women's Studies curriculum. For example, the taster web page titled 'About Women's Studies' has sought to value women's own experiences, encourage reflection on these, and lead to more critical and

explanatory thinking about personal experiences by making connections with the ideas of others. Two main ways have been devised to achieve these aims: the first is that the text poses questions to the user and encourages them to follow hot links to other web pages on which other students and potential students have posted messages about their experiences, and they can do the same; secondly, the text offers some theoretical and analytical ideas for the student/potential student to consider and these can be developed further by exploring hot links to other modules or further resources on the World-Wide Web. An exercise has been built into this taster which involves students in navigating their way through the web (with guidance) to identify various women's web-sites, and assess these in terms of style and content, and comment on the images, ideas and identities being presented by posting their views to a 'chatroom' on the Women's Studies web-site.

Through these activities potential Women's Studies students are gaining a flavour of the feminist learning and teaching style as well as an appreciation of the course content, and they are beginning to experience becoming constructors of knowledge. By sharing information and evaluations of other web-sites, students will be creating flexible learning resources, whilst developing their skills in the use of information technology, and in search, selection and analysis. In other words, there is a positive 'Net effect' as students develop learning and activist tools that are of use to both the University and community based feminists (Alice, 1996, used this term to describe the effect of web based learning and email on a distance learning Women's studies programme in New Zealand.)

In addition, since the Women's Studies course is part of the broad provision of courses aimed at widening participation, the framework has been designed to provide access to other relevant institutional information and support. For example, each page has hot links to the University Home Page, which in turn creates a route to a wide variety of information and support; other links to 'Frequently Asked Questions', 'Experiences', and 'What's New' attempt to create a more sociable space for information gathering, and the style of the text here encourages more informal discourse; lastly each page has some navigational cues and links to enable individuals to find their way.

In sum, central to this design has been a need to include participatory democratic processes and some sharing of power between teachers and students. The design has tried to do more than simply provide access to information through structured web pages with hypertext links to further resources because that learning model would assume a solitary learner. Instead, the focus has been to offer a curriculum which raises questions about the social construction of knowledge, and so the ways in which this is delivered need to encourage such thinking. Without this my concern would be that the subtext of the 'lessons' would negate the intentions of the course developers. If the delivery methods do not create space in the learning process to legitimate new ideas and the diversity of learners' experiences, then it is likely that learners will not 'hear' the curriculum aims about developing critical thinking, and instead will assume that their task is to absorb bodies of knowledge approved by an academy that is 'other' to them.

Geekgirls or Cybersisters? Some conclusions about women's experiences on-line

- Initial conclusions have supported the findings of others that although electronic communications may appear impersonal, they gave students the opportunities to discuss personal information and receive support from each other (O'Hare and Kahn, 1996). In addition, the students, who were in the main women, also liked the feeling of competence gained by using the computer. As Jennie said in her first email to me,

> "Two hours ago I couldn't have imagined that I would be sitting here feeling quite comfortable, sending you this ... this has been fantastic, enlightening, positive experience for someone who didn't even understand what an email was this morning! I shall not hesitate to use the computer room again."

Increasingly the on-line exchanges have been mixing personal information, and messages of support with more 'on task' talk, and this suggests that learning does touch the self, and that it is not simply a matter of accumulation of new knowledge. Also, by learning in this way many of the students and tutors have repositioned themselves in relation to computer technology. There has been a sense of identity shift, and many have begun to admit to almost being 'techies' or maybe 'geekgirls'.

Further analysis of the form and style of the communications on-line has suggested that social context has been crucial. The discussion list has been women only (and indeed the effect of men participating in classrooms has been one of the topics of discussion on-line, and there was a unanimous response in the postings that men's participation distorted women's communications). The women have diverse backgrounds, they were of different ages, 'races', sexual orientation, live in different parts of the region and in many cases had not met each other, but they had a shared experience in studying Women's Studies with the University. As a consequence many of the social norms which have been used to build trust in face to face communications have been absent, and yet in the discussion about whether or not men should have a place within Women's Studies, the need for 'trust' in communications was the concept used by all of the participants to justify women only discussions. It would seem then that whilst the norms of face to face interaction may not be explicitly present in their on-line discussions, there has been a normative spill-over from the classroom that has affected the construction of the on-line talk. Perhaps then, rather than conceptualising the two forms of communications as distinct, one should bear in mind the context in which they have been experienced, which in this case has encouraged some permeability between on and off-line communications.

When looking at the topics which have been discussed so far, the content has been very wide-ranging, and shown how the new technology can facilitate activities well beyond the walls of the academic classroom. In these ways it has fulfilled some of the expectations students have voiced in the focus groups, for further research and scholarship aligned with feminist activism, and so 'cybersisters' may be a more appropriate term than 'geekgirls' for the identity that these students have been develop-

ing. For example, discussions have included the following: personal exchanges, with chat about home-life, family and domestic matters, likes and dislikes, TV programmes, and anxieties or concerns for the future; exchanges about resources and research interests or opportunities which have included the exchange of URLs and giving of hot links; the exchange of information about feminist activities and conferences; and political or conceptual debates about issues arising from the Women's Studies courses. Within these exchanges there has been much evidence of 'rapport' rather than 'report' talk. Personal information has been disclosed and support offered when experiences and worries have been shared. Frequently, discussion has been qualified and bounded by the use of phrases such as 'I think', 'I feel', and 'I was wondering', and in other words, it has typified what Tannen (1991) has described as the hedges often used by women. In addition, these hedged comments seem to have promoted interaction because they have been 'read' as questions which require an answer rather being merely understood as a presentation of opinions. These styles have been further encouraged by the ways in which they have copied each other's messages in their replies, and responded often line by line to each others ideas. As a consequence the form of communications that has been constructed has been highly interdependent and relational, and this has been confirmed by focus group discussions and interviews with those who have only read the messages and not yet contributed on-line, because they have said that they still feel they have been part of the conversation.

In conclusion, this story about women's experiences on the Internet seems to have been one which has been full of contradictions. Rather than the idea of two competing stories, one optimistic and one pessimistic, which has been the dominant way of accounting for women's experiences on the Internet, the notions of fluidity and multiple identities seem more useful concepts for describing the expectations and experiences students have had about learning in these new ways. On the one hand, their commitment to the idea that the sharing of personal experiences has been central to adult learning has meant that for some there has been initial resistance or caution and scepticism in relation to CSNL, coupled with in some cases a fear of the new and untried. Yet on the other hand, many of these 'resisters', 'sceptics' and 'fearful ones'

along with the 'enthusiasts' have begun to show enjoyment of learning on-line. Their reworked argument has been that it has provided more opportunities for professional networking and political activism, and in these ways, academic theorising and reflection has moved off the pages of books and assignments and into the rest of their lives, though how these changes come about is another story. As one of the initial 'sceptics' has said,

> "technology is classed as male/masculine in this society or is viewed as unsexy - just for nerds. It is too important to be ignored"
>
> *Teresa (Women's Studies student)*

Appendix 1

- Checklist for Women's Studies Web-site Development

The design should:

- value experiences

- create space for support and sharing

- theorise experiences and locate them in wider contexts

- recognise learners have different starting points and different aims

- consider who decides what knowledge is coherent

- ensure that learner constructed knowledge has validity

- encourage critical thinking

- avoid a deficit model of learners

- problematise the role of the tutor as expert

- offer an adequate base for questioning knowledge

- avoid an overly instructionist model

- encourage constructionist learning

and Web experiences which have been considered important were:

- easy navigation around Web pages - cues to let you know where you are

- opportunities to go to further resources

- a dislike of dead ends and finding the next step to finding information involves writing a letter or making a telephone call

- reading about others' experiences and being able to send messages

- threaded discussions where the structure of the argument is visible

- closed group discussions - safe environments, encourage naive questions

- dislike of technical terms which aren't explained

- clear ground rules for participating in on-line communications

- ways of reinserting social cues in on-line communications

- 'chitchat' emails way of building trust

- dislike of slowness of response to 'burning' questions

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