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## **Review of 'Feminist Cyberspaces: Pedagogies in Transition'**

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### **REVIEW**

*Feminist Cyberspaces: Pedagogies in Transition* is a collection of case studies which look to incorporate women into the 21<sup>st</sup> century technology- based classroom, exploring technologies such as gaming, Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and social networking. This is a book for lecturers and post-graduates and firmly sits within the genre of education. The book is split into two sections- "Widening the Scope of the Traditional Classroom: Technology and Feminist Pedagogy" (Chapters 1-7) and "The Virtual Classroom: Distance Education and Virtual Worlds" (Chapters 8-14); these two sections could perhaps have been split differently as some chapters seem to fit well with those in the other section.

The book has two main types of case studies - those which are technological courses which look at feminism (where the discussions are for those with knowledge of social networking, blogging etc.) or those which are feminist courses which utilise technology (where the technology itself is new to the author/s so the discussion is about how the material is crossed over to be used in a technological forum such as VLE). It begins with an introduction by Sharon Collingwood who discusses her own introduction to technology in education and the inbuilt biases and assumptions which led to her own involvement in this area.

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This is followed by Chapter One, the first essay *Feminist Worlding: Media Ecologies Learning* by Katie King, Jarah Moesch and women's studies students from 'Share IT!' at Maryland University. This article looks at the mixing of practical technology within academia. The layout itself feels like involvement in a social networking site and leads the reader to want, subconsciously, to send an 'online' message back to the authors mid read (be this a thumbs up, down or LOL (Laugh Out Loud for the uninitiated). This feels more like an exercise in self-reflection and less like the traditional work of academia and perhaps this itself helps lend an overall feel of support rather than simple information to the reader. This is an innovative chapter but seems more geared towards those who understand the Internet and social networking to a certain degree.

Next, Chapter Two, *Counterculture, Craftsmanship, and Cyberspace Connectivity: Considerations of Contemporary Feminist Zines in/as/of Art Education* by Courtney Lee Weida, looks at the fanzine or 'zine' (a fan based magazine) and its role within society, the digital age and as an expression of feminism. Weida describes the creation of a zine as a 'labor of love' and this would seem to encapsulate this chapter. The author is a self-proclaimed 'zineist' (creator of a zine) and this chapter discusses the role of zines within society and more specifically as a tool within the role of feminist discourse. Digital zines seem almost an afterthought at times and the article repeatedly focuses on hardcopy as an important social icon and the importance of the physical zine and this seems a bit disconnected with the overall message of the book as a discussion on the positives of 'cyberculture'. It is an interesting and well thought out chapter within itself and more justice would have been made if this had not been placed within an anthology of digital essays.

Chapter Three is *From the Center: Bridging the "Divide" through Feminist Jail-based HIV/AIDS Education and Digital Storytelling* by Margaret Rhee and Isela González. This looks at digital storytelling as a way women in San Francisco prisons can tell their stories, in relation to HIV/ AIDS, through basic computer-based digital means. Digital storytelling is a means to self-empower the individuals and for them to inform others; thereby becoming both student and teacher. The article discusses the beginnings of a possible project and so considers what they aim to achieve for both participants and links with appropriate individuals/ organisations who work in the same area. This is a thought provoking article and brings in the serious social issues of incarceration and HIV/ AIDS and looks at a possible means of breaking the cycle of both by education and knowledge.

Chapter Four, *Teaching with Blogs and Blogging while Teaching: Using Blogs to expand access to feminist (Cyber) Spaces* is by Sara L. Puotinen and Kandace Creel Falcón. Similar to Chapter One, this chapter is laid out in an untraditional format for a book chapter and rather in the format of a 'blog' (which lends itself to the intent of the piece). This chapter also connects well with Chapter One as it looks at new technology in the classroom and how both authors teach feminism using 'blogs' as a method of discourse. The authors' discussions involve the use of blogs to give their learners an opportunity to converse and transcend the usual boundaries of learning/ teaching. This chapter was deeply enthralling and, like me, you might seriously consider logging on to their blogs (which the authors invite you to do). With VLEs becoming an integral part of colleges and universities this article is especially relevant and 'strikes a chord' with new approaches to augment the 'traditional' classroom.

In Chapter Five, *Cyberquilting: Weaving our Herstories through Anti-Colonial Feminist Research*, Lisa Child, Deena Dadachanji, Sara Mohammed aend Danielle Smith study

personal histories through the use of technologies such as the internet to contact relatives too distant to meet face-to-face; a dichotomy of wanting a physical presence vs. the ability to interact with people living a far distance away. Interspersed with this is the cultural background of the authors as they discuss their need to ground their culture in a long past history from different countries through a feminist perspective. These stories are then shared via 'cyberquilting', where technology is used so that groups far apart can meet via the internet to discuss their different histories and at times similarities. This chapter feels like the personal journey it is for these authors and suggests a way to link with the past.

Chapter Six is *Clicking in a Women's Studies Classroom: New Instructional Technologies and Feminist Pedagogies* by Chikako Takeshita, Jennifer Keys and Christine Gailey. This chapter looks at the use of 'clickers' (small wireless devices where learners choose one option and it is displayed in a graph form) in a large lecture theatre to personalise the teacher/learner interaction which can become impersonal in such a large setting. Here anonymity gives the students the ability to answer without fear of negative response. They can also see and understand that others have the same views and this can lead to further discussion on sensitive topics related to the feminist classroom. This use of wireless technology (now augmented with mobiles) is linked to technology's development in the classroom and shows how technology, rather than making interaction cold and detached, can instead be used as a tool to foster communication.

Chapter Seven, *Digital Story Gender Project: Teaching Gender in the Digital Age* by L. Ayu Saraswati is a nice counterpoint to chapter three as it also discusses digital stories and their social impact; in this case focused within the classroom. It is seeking to encapsulate feminism and social issues. The author sees 'digital storytelling' as a type of virtual space and discusses this in relation to virtual spaces within the Internet. She discusses the different stages of the project and this at times feels like a user guide for others to utilise the same approach. This chapter could have been furthered with comments from the students discussing how they found each stage of the project.

Chapter Eight, *Women's Studies and Cyberspace: Redesigning the Introduction of Women's Studies* by Michelle McGibbney Vlahoulis and Marcella Gemelli relates to several in section 1 (Widening the Scope of the Traditional Classroom: Technology and Feminist Pedagogy) and as a VLE linked to a physical course would seem to fit more in that section than section 2 (The Virtual Classroom: Distance Education and Virtual Worlds). However this can be said for several chapters. The chapter itself is a discussion of the use of VLE alongside traditional teaching. This 'hybrid' approach discusses how incorporating VLE teaching can improve the course and develop ways that students access and utilise the material. This chapter is interesting as it is the use of technology by a feminist course which is itself not technical. Unlike chapter one, for instance, the reader does not need to have a background in the use and terminology of technology and so this chapter is most appropriate for those new to systems such as VLE.

Chapter Nine is *A European E-Learning Program on Gendered and Sexualized Violence: Developing a Feminist Pedagogy of Non-Violence* by Mervi Heikkinen, Suvi Pihkala and Vappa Sunnari. As discussed the split of the book does not seem to always follow a prescribed pattern and this chapter would fit well with several in the first section involved with serious social issues linked to feminism and technology. It shows how the e-learning environment can be used to facilitate a discussion on an

area which is highly sensitive, and at times with emotional subject matter, by allowing learners the 'space' and time to discuss the necessary themes and interlink to their own experiences in a way they feel comfortable sharing with their peers.

Chapter Ten, *Assistive Technologies: Accessing Voice and Selfhood in an Age of Digital Technologies* by Susan Smith Nash left me with two main views. Firstly, on the basis of a discussion of assistive technologies linked to technology, it was interesting, informative and brought up issues which resonated well with any educator. Secondly, the 'feminist' part of this was additional and this chapter would perhaps have been more appropriate in a book not specifically written for a feminist outlook on cyberspaces. This detracted from what is a highly relevant topic in this day and age as technology becomes so much a part of our day-to-day life.

Chapter Eleven, *Women's Health and Well-being: A Transcultural/ Transnational Teaching and Learning Collaboration* by Kimberlee Staking is an interesting look at bringing views of feminist discourse from different countries and cultural backgrounds to one e-platform thereby expanding the knowledge and definitions which are inherent within our own prescribed Worldview. The extracts from learners were interesting and showed how terms differ depending on one's own relational standpoint. This study showed what can be achieved with technology as well as showing the work and commitment needed (as well as at times the issues with technology and resources).

Chapter Twelve, *Feminist Web 2.0 Pedagogy: Collaborations that Sustain Difference* by Karen Keifer-Boyd looks at the pre-assumptions harboured within societies and how these can be altered by interaction and discussions with different cultures. Specifically in this study, interaction is between those from the US and Uganda. It discusses how these assumptions may not even be realised until they are found to be different or incorrect. The main focus is on artwork created to represent these discussions and begins with images found from the internet and the commentary attached to each of these. It utilises the feminist framework as a way of looking at learning that differs from the traditional and aims to teach through 'transformative learning'.

Chapter Thirteen, *Feminist Teaching in Virtual Worlds: Development of a Pedagogy* by Sharon Collingwood examines virtual worlds (mainly Second Life) and their use as a classroom. This is a thought provoking chapter and shows the varied settings (from mimicry of 'real' classrooms to completely artificial and steps in-between) and also looks at the avatar and the implications of its representation. It posits how this environment is useful within a feminist classroom due to the ability –both to introduce the nature of self- identification and - to include guest speakers and those from a variety of locations all within the virtual space. It discusses the issues which can be linked to the technology (technically both from the user and within the environment) and uses examples of SL sites to show the possibilities within this environment.

Chapter Fourteen is *Layered Literacies and Nuanced identities: Placing Praxis from MOO Space to Second Life* by Radhika Gajjala, Sue Ellen McComas, Franklin Yartey, Anca Birzescu, Heather Sloane and Yahui Zhang. This chapter looks at the relationship between online and offline identities, in particular the intersection where preconceived notions in 'real' life can affect those identities in an online virtual world. This is backed by looking at the student's views as they utilise these virtual environments. This counterbalances well with Chapter Thirteen.

Finally, in an Afterword- *Technology, Change, and Future Collaborations*, Alvina E. Quintana and Caroline J. Smith discuss the editorial process briefly and how they utilised digital means to co-operate due to their different locations, this itself mirroring the message of the book. This is a book which strives to show how technology and feminism can develop hand-in-hand and does so successfully. This anthology adds well to the body of feminist academic literature and looks at how modern technology is changing the face of education and relates this to feminist teaching.