Blogging in the Classroom: Technology, Feminist Pedagogy, and Participatory Learning

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Abstract

This exploration of blogs as a tool for enhancing feminist participatory learning is situated within extant technofeminist debates and grows out of assignments in a feminist cultural studies class. The paper considers how blogs generally support all aims of participatory learning, connectivity and identity politics in particular.

Résumé

Cette exploration de blogs comme outil pour accroître l'apprentissage féministe participatif est situé à l'intérieur de débats technoféministes qui existent encore et est tiré des devoirs dans une classe d'études sur la culture féministe. L'article considère comment les blogs supportent généralement tous les objectifs de l'apprentissage participatif, les politiques de connectivité et d'identité en particulier.

Introduction

This paper explores the use of blogs in feminist participatory learning. The explorations grow out of a second year feminist cultural studies class in which it became clear that blogs are an effective entry point into the participatory component of the Dialogic, Participatory and Experiential (DPE) model articulated by Ngan-Ling Chow *et al.* (2003): they empower students to own assignments in ways "meaningful and interesting to them," a task closely connected to identity politics; they encourage students to see the meaning of learning beyond grades (2003, 262); they empower students to legitimate their knowledge to transform them into teachers and learners; and they promote connectivity and collectivization.[1]

Students' work illustrated how blogs enhance participatory learning and how blogs are particular technological tools that inform feminist pedagogy in ways that more traditional tools such as closed discussion pages, papers, or even in-class discussions cannot: blogs immediately connect the classroom space to the outside world to increase students' sense of collectivism; and as a genre that encourages rants and personalized opinion pieces they make it easier for students to connect subjects to their personal lives. This paper is informed by technofeminist debates and it contextualizes blogs within the framework of participatory learning as defined by the DPE model and extant critiques.

The Assignment

Students could choose whether they wanted to produce a zine, blog or traditional paper over three assignments. By the end of the term most had produced both 'zines and blogs. None of the students opted for the

traditional paper. Blogging groups researched topics and developed an analysis based on online discussions. The posts were informal and students could use MSN language. On the due date, the groups posted a traditionally academic conclusion to a communal Jigsaw blog.

Blogs as Genre

My area of expertise lies in literary analysis. As such, I approached the blogs as nuanced texts produced in a feminist classroom from which we can extrapolate whether or not blogs enhance participatory learning. As a junior faculty member, I have used blogs in only one class to date. The posts and comments made by the students, however, reveal how blogging contributed to their empowerment even when the only empowerment was a public online voice to talk back to extant power structures (hooks 1989). Blogs facilitate talk back as they are a specific genre that often relies on personal narratives, opinion, hypertext, rants and research and enables students to interact with assignments in ways they would not be able to on a closed discussion board, traditional paper or in-class discussions.

Blogging rants are particularly important within the context of feminist pedagogy. Iglesias and Cormier wrote about voice and identity that "girls from diverse groups need to be given ways to tell their stories" (2002, 269). Blogs provide a space where women's stories can be told. What can be said in a blog is very different from what can be said in a traditional essay, for example. Further, as hypertext allows for fluid textuality and blogs invite comments from people outside the class, what can be said in a blog differs from what can be said in class discussions and closed web groups. This liminal nature of blogs replicates feminist discourse; they are spaces that are both inside and outside the classroom, academic and personal, personal and political, rants and research. Blogs encourage writers to make links between personal experiences and social politics.

The Technofeminist Framework

My use of blogs to promote feminist participatory learning was informed by technofeminist debates on technology and the Internet. Exploring blogs as feminist texts informs recent technofeminist work on women and the Internet in two ways: blogging and encouraging student interest in blogs disrupts the binary that represents men as the active producers/users of technology; and, pursuant to postmodern technofeminism, using cyberspace in the classroom opens up possibilities for more fluid identities, a tool that enables students to connect to the subject in ways that are meaningful to them.

The first approach disrupts the dialectic that posited men as active users of technology which was typical of much second-wave feminist theory (Wajcman 2004, 10-31). Certainly, software and hardware producers were and generally are men and androcentrism is reflected in the products. The hyper-masculine gaming hero or (when she does appear) the hyper-sexualized heroine like Lara Croft are obvious examples. The use of computer technology in the classroom as a potentially liberating tool for women is a fairly recent proposal (Selfe 1990). In 1994, Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Melissa Kesler Gilbert called for "a proactive feminist pedagogy that enhances women's computer learning by demystifying the computer and promoting technological equity" and asserted that technology in the classroom would produce a more engaged and creative space (1994, 19-20).

Although much second-wave commentary dismissed technology as patriarchal, early analysis of the Internet was different. The Internet was described as democratically egalitarian (Rhodes 2002, 119): liberal feminists highlighted its potential for cyber equality ignoring that cyberspace is potentially egalitarian for the small number of the world's billions who have the time, money and resources to access it (Hawisher and Selfe 2000b, 2). To some extent the liberal feminist vision of a "good society" marked by communities of choice instead of proximity was taken up by cyberfeminists (Plant 1998;

Wajcman 2004, 63-6).

Cyberfeminists such a Judy Wajcman theorize that the Internet provides for "women's subjectivity and agency" (2004, 63). Unlike the gendered division between the male producer/consumer and invisible female user, the Internet is gendered more fluidly and more femininely (2004, 52-5), described as "the ideal feminine medium...because women excel within fluid systems and processes" (2004, 64). Women are, it is argued, better suited to postmodern technoculture than men because they work independently, flexibly and adapt quickly. This essentialist, somewhat conservative construction of women is, without doubt, problematic (2004, 72-5).

Furthermore, issues of access are left largely unaddressed by cyberfeminism. The majority of the Internet is in English (Dragona and Handa 2000), and class, geographical location and cultural capital such as education, access to electricity and equipment and disposable income must be taken into account to determine which women will access the Internet's liberating potential. Examples of blogs from Iranian women or occupied peoples (who must have the cultural capital to log on) are exceptions to the rule. The Internet continues to be dominated by the educated middle-class of the one-third world (Wajcman 2004, 119). For these and other reasons, not all technofeminists share cyberfeminists' or liberal feminists' views of a woman-positive Web. Some commentators reject its egalitarian potential altogether (Rhodes 2002, 121-6) and illustrate how it is another arena where women struggle to find a space (Camp 1996, 115; Hawisher and Sullivan 1998, 173-86).

These technofeminist debates frame the use of blogs as a feminist participatory tool; blogs produced in a feminist classroom contribute to feminist voices online, whether as equal voices or resistant stories that carve out a niche in a patriarchal space. Politically, the class blogs were activism-based: the more feminist voices there are on the Internet, the harder it will be to silence us (Brail 1996, 156; Rhodes 2002, 125).

Blogs & Participatory Learning: Potential and Pitfalls

As the liminal nature of blogs discursively connects them to feminism, it stands to reason that they would be suited to feminist pedagogy which aims to liberate and empower students by engaging them in critical thought and action (Fisher 1978). The DPE model is one feminist alternative to the banking model of teaching. Liberation is not guaranteed by the model, however. Critiques of feminist pedagogy, many of which come from feminists themselves, argue that repressive assumptions mar the utopian rhetoric of critical and radical theory. Assumptions about the neutral role of the teacher, for example, make the teacher's own biases and identity politics invisible; assumptions about authentic student voices belie the internalized oppressions students can bring to class; and assumptions that students always speak from one legitimate fixed identity ignore the fluidity of identity politics (Ellsworth 1989, 298-310). Like feminist pedagogy in general, there is both the promise of liberation and easy criticism attached to participatory learning.

Potential

Participatory learning aims to empower students to shape class assignments in ways that are meaningful to them to encourage students to see the relevance of their learning beyond grades, to empower students to value their knowledge and that of their peers in order to disrupt the teacher/learner hierarchy and to promote a sense of connection and collectivization through shared participation (Ngan-Ling Chow *et al.* 2003).

Pitfalls

The model articulated by Ngan-Ling Chow *et al.* elicits easy criticism. Teacher authority is always implicitly present in the classroom and instructors have a responsibility to interrupt relations of dominance when they arise (Hillyer Davis 1985; Manicom 1992, 380). Student control within institutional frameworks can therefore

be, at best, an understanding that they will have more say in the assignments and the opportunity to connect the assignments to their own interests. However, when students took ownership of the blogsphere to introduce their varied research findings to the class - including the instructor - the instructor/learner relationship was destabilized to produce a more cooperative, fluid, learning space. Students provided the information and blogs thus destabilized classroom hierarchies.

Further, some critics argue that to undo women professors' authority in the classroom perpetuates traditional patriarchal structures which delegitimize women's stories and knowledge (Webber 2005, 191-3). Male-centred knowledge, the intellectual tradition of the academy, is represented as rational and objective allowing male professors to be easily accepted by students as neutral authorities (Rich 1979; Smith 1992, 221-3 and 1999, 202; Webber 2005). Consequently, students learn to construct feminist knowledge as illegitimate opinion and women professors as caregivers who are often evaluated on their personal attributes (Atwood 1994; Bauer 1990; Heald 1989; Titus 2000; Webber 2005, 188 & 190). Any authority that women can establish in the classroom, then, could arguably be a feminist act and women who give up authority may only perpetuate the dismissal of women's knowledge in the academe (Webber 2005, 192). In this context, strategies that aim to disrupt the student/teacher dialectic may be antithetical to feminism.

Yet another critique of participatory learning, articulated by Martha Giminez, argues that student participation is no more than volunteerism; superficial action for the sake of grades (1998, 119). Giminez does not consider how students may become engaged in the class, however. Without question, students in this class initially blogged for grades, but they soon went beyond the assignment requirements. The group collectively had to post 58 blog entries per week on average; there were on average 78 entries per week and output was sustained over the term. Blogs were vehicles toward a grade and they also facilitated the positive outcomes of participatory learning.

Blogs and Participatory Goals

Despite critiques of the DPE model, the comments posted by students indicate that blogs enabled all strands of participatory learning and enhanced two in particular. They encouraged students to see the meaning of their work beyond grades and were spaces where students legitimized their knowledge. Blogs further informed two areas of participatory learning in ways that closed discussion boards, traditional papers or even in-class discussions cannot: they more easily connected the class subjects and the "real world" through identity politics and they fostered a greater sense of collectivization. All four of these categories overlap and any one of them can be an entry point into participatory learning.

CLASS ASSIGNMENTS & THE "REAL WORLD": OWNERSHIP AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Students regularly interacted with assignments in personally meaningful ways. Soaring Sky (Nov. 18) connected an assignment on Barbie to colonization and integrative feminism: "These 'multiculturized' characterizations of Barbie erase the social, political and colonial histories of the many diverse races that are supposedly being represented…Men are not the only ones who oppress...Patriarchy is only one strand of a much larger tangle of oppressions, such as class, age, sexuality, ability, etcetera." Alia (Oct. 20) drew on her/his artistic background to post Andy Warhol's famous picture of a banana to illustrate how multiple media represent homosexuality. Both transformed the assignments so that they were more directly meaningful.

While participatory learning encourages student empowerment by connecting discussions to the "outside world," a "reduced risk" or "connected" (Selfe 1990) space allows them to negotiate tensions and ambiguities in their own research. Blogs' liminality moved the dialogue into the contradictions and tensions engendered by

third space, cyborgian identity politics and the possibilities of Web hybridism (Hawisher and Selfe 2000a, 277-89). Flello's (Oct. 19) entry about the reality show *Australian Princess* articulated contradictory feelings that were not unique in most discussions:

> I find it really hard to academically evaluate a show such as "Australian Princess" in that I am torn within myself about it...it is classist, heterosexist, able-ist, etc., etc. However, I also remember wanting to "be a princess when I grew up"...it is so easy to slip into binary thinking...I am not in a place (nor is anyone else) to judge what another person likes or dislikes, or to make stereotypes regarding certain socialization. Maybe I just did though...judging those that judge? Tricky....

The contradictions Flello articulates connect to Homi Bhabha's "third space" and Donna Haraway's cyborgian identities. Bhabha's space is a hybrid location of tension where discourse holds divergent views without having to choose between them (Bhabha 1994). Many students confessed to both love and hate reality shows or expressed feelings of guilt about loving romantic comedies while they deconstructed them. Cyborgian identities are the "hybrids, mosaics, chimeras" that escape gender constraints to invent a new politicized subjectivity reliant on technology - in this case the blogsphere - to exist (Haraway 1991, 177).

Blogs enable hybrid identities. They allow students to personalize entries with pictures, film, music and links. Michele Polak remarked of teen gURLs that venues which allow people to frame their identities "against - or with - both textual and graphical imagery can offer a step toward empowerment" (2006, 178). Chris Abbott, in his work on symbol literacy finds that they can "give a voice to those who may not otherwise be heard" (2002, 38). The potential for personalization through graphics, symbols, sounds, or links makes it possible for hypertext to enhance students' sense of ownership because it allows for multiple identity markers to enter the blog space.

The personalized comment, "I like this picture," implicit when students upload images - a task extraneous to the assignments - illustrates how they shape online identities. They are simultaneously students writing a blog for class, web-explorers/researchers and self-actuators through their choice of graphics. Hawisher and Sullivan find that young women online craft "a self out of [their] textual and graphical choices" (1999, 281). Crafting an online identity with symbols was important to the students; they included graphics as soon as they started blogging and crafting became more apparent as the pictures and multiple textual genres increased.

Some blog posts, by the last of the three assignments, included highly creative entries alongside research. One example was Steph's (Nov. 15) post, "Hi this is Barbie speaking!" which s/he wrote from Barbie's perspective. S/he (Nov. 20) later clarified the entry in a post that revealed how blogging encourages personal connections to subject-matter and the opportunity to rant: "I'm glad you all liked my delirium speaking as Barbie! I wanted to give some of my frustrations about Barbie a voice...my biggest issue with Barbie, is that she has no voice." Steph's casual tone and direct address to the class illustrate a sense of ownership and connectivity. The blog was transformed from a space to post research findings and discuss the assignment to a space that was much more subjective, nuanced and complex.

Relevance of Learning Beyond Grades

When students participate in assignments in ways that are meaningful to them they are encouraged to see the relevance of learning beyond their grades and, ideally, apply feminist practice to their everyday lives. This aspect was best exemplified in a post by Soaring Sky (Sept. 30):

> I was wondering if this is one of the

> reasons for this assignment - to get us to question our culture, what we see in society and the media, reach beyond the obvious norms and think for ourselves. In my opinion, part of thinking for ourselves is the use of "praxis," more meaningful than "theory put into practice," but "reflection and action to transform the world" [quoting Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*]...thinking for ourselves can be a dangerous thing in this society. I think about Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, JFK and his brother Bobby, Leonard Peltier, Nelson Mandela, Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash, Dudley George...They have paid, and continue to pay with their lives.

Sky's comments draw on her/his own knowledge to illustrate that s/he sees connections between a research project on culture jamming and local and global politics of oppression.

Legitimated knowledge(s)

Blog entries indicated that students recognized their abilities and those of their peers. They repeatedly encouraged each other, as in these examples: KimiJ (Nov. 19) commented, "way to find such a great article Jessica! The discussion your find has motivated is great;" jaube (ca. Sept. 20) told DragonflyPhebe "I loved this video;" and Melissa (ca. Sept. 25) commented "Hi!Kim thats a great comment funny but yet true!" The positive notes students made reinforced the value of their work and legitimated the knowledge they brought to the blog. Other entries illustrated that students did indeed trust their own knowledge. Courtney, Flello, acreid, glasses! and Soaring Sky frequently quoted from materials they were reading outside class.

Fostering connectivity and collectivism

A participatory classroom is marked by how it participates in the world outside. Described as "hands-on," "public," and "purposeful" (Ngan-Ling Chow *et al.* 2003; Rhodes 2002), it allows students to make connections between class theories and real life and to "recognize the potential benefits of collective action outside of the classroom" (Ngan-Ling Chow *et al.* 2003, 262). A sense of collective aims and goals and the strength in drawing on multiple knowledges develops students' teamwork skills whilst complicating the hierarchical teacher/student relationship.

The example of Sky's (Sept. 30) entry reflected a sense of collectivism through the use of the pronouns "us," "we," and "ourselves." Entries that collectively addressed the class were posted regularly. Blogs' generic ability to increase students' sense of communal information-sharing / gathering and connectivity with groups and people outside the classroom further enabled feminist pedagogical goals. Connection with the outside world was re-affirmed every time commentators like T Moore skater gurl (Oct. 3) and pearlz (Sept. 25) visited the site. Some students asked that I not delete the blogs after the class ended so they could be available to others as online educational activism. Blogs thus cement that classwork goes beyond grades - they are public, political discussions that are accessed by others online. In this way, blogs enable feminist pedagogy more than closed discussion boards, traditional papers or even in-class discussions can.

Blogs allow students to take public ownership of their ideas in a "reduced risk," fairly anonymous space. Cynthia Selfe defines a "reduced risk" space as a place of connectivity (1990, 131). The connections students made on the blogs were multilayered. The blogs were designed as group projects so to some extent connection was forced; however, students soon formed links between the blogs and the other class

projects exemplified by a comment from glasses! (ca. Sept. 20), "I'm doing my culture jam for my group's zine on the feminine hygeine [sic] industry...Thanks for posting this, very helpful and interesting." Other links to multiple websites and activists (for example, Steph Sept. 23) illustrated that students felt they could legitimately take the blog in multiple directions.

When silveraa, the creator and executive producer of the A&E reality show *God or The Girl* joined a discussion about how *GOTG* perpetuates gender stereotypes, student response was excited and critical. Soaring Sky (Oct. 19b) began her/his entry "this is pretty awesome" and then explored the "Endorsements by the Faith Community" on *GOTG*'s website which ultimately undermined silveraa's (Oct. 17) assertion that *GOTG* was simply "the story about four guys who are going through what would be considered an unusual experience in today's society," choosing between marriage and the priesthood. S/he then signed off, "this is sooo cool!" michelle (Oct. 21) wrote: "i was actually really excited when I saw that," and acreid (Oct. 22b) expressed her/his views by posting excerpts from a *Bitch Magazine* article, "Sex or the Sexism." Students used knowledge from their further investigations to assert themselves and illustrated that they recognized their own work as legitimate.

While visitors contributed to the groups' collectivization, blogs enabled connectivity because of the fluidity of hypertext. This particular type of discourse is unavailable in closed discussion boards, traditional papers, or even, arguably, class discussion, with the exception of tangential anecdotes. Johndan Johnson-Eilola argues that hypertext is a nonlinear tangential web of communities and communication (1997, 30). In this sense, he argues elsewhere, hypertext connects easily to "postmodernism and poststructuralism, reader-response criticism and critical literacy, and collaborative learning and social construction theory" (1994, 196). Hypertext not only allows students to shape online identities, class assignments and claim ownership of the blog, it also enhances connectivity, an important goal of participatory learning.

Students often inserted links to the outside world. Examples include information about activist groups (Kathryn Mamo Oct. 16) and a link to Little Sisters Bookstore's ongoing legal battle with Canada Customs (DragonflyPhebe Nov. 21). Sites of personal interest that students saw as relevant to the topic, such as DragonflyPhebe's (Sept. 19) link to a tampon ad parody, and jaube's (Sept. 21) link to an article relevant to the group's project, to name but two, were also popular; and students often hyperlinked words to explanatory webpages.

The use of hypertext in blogging exemplifies the flexibility - and according to cyberfeminists (Plant 1998), the femininity - of online discourse. Communication based in complex, tangential webs discursively connect to Hélène Cixous' (1975) *l'écriture féminine* and cultural feminists' analyses of women's speech, writing and thought patterns (Gilligan 1982; 1986). These similarities have led some cultural theorists to remark on the connections between the Web and "the 'web-thinking' that marks women's moral development" (Rhodes 2002, 119). Critiques can certainly be made of the monolithic women who all think, write and morally develop in the same way; however, the non-linearity of hypertext does connect the class space to the outside world, an important aim of participatory learning because through such connections, students can link class concepts to extant power structures and ideally, resist domination. One example came from a group that had been asked to research representations of Gay Lesbian Bisexual Trans Two-Spirit and Queer (GLBTTQ) characters on television.

Soaring Sky (Oct. 11) blogged after s/he received a phone call from a church coalition doing a poll on same-sex marriage. Sarah H. (Oct. 16) commented in a frustrated rant generically supported by blogs: "Imagine if our government and the citizens of Canada spent as much time and money on ensuring safe drinking water for all communities, on offering adequate social support for families

and/or on truely [sic] caring for people who are homeless or living without anyone to care for them."

Soaring Sky's (Oct. 16) answer also fit the blog genre of highly personalized views:

> It's as if the Liberal government said "ok GLBTs, you're human now," and then Harper's...government is saying, "ok, now you're not human anymore, or, there are limits to your humanity." How does democracy work, if it is democracy, in a state whose current government endeavours to exclude segments of its own population?...What the hell does democracy in Canada mean then?

Kathryn Mamo (Oct. 16) then followed a link I had posted to tell the class what they could do to support same-sex marriage. Soaring Sky (Oct. 19) posted a link to the Canada Family Action Coalition so the class could see why s/he had received the call, and acreid (Oct. 22a) raised the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to join Kathryn in urging the class to action: "we need to fight to protect these hard-won gains, and put them into practice." The discussion transformed the assignment to situate representations of GLBTTQ characters within the broader political structures that promote heterosexism. Contributions from acreid and Kathryn Mamo asked the group to consider the legal implications of heterosexism and to connect with an equality campaign.

Final Thoughts

I had not anticipated the extent to which the blogs would enable students to take ownership of assignments. After I handed out projects, early entries posted the assignment question and students organized their responsibilities according to personal interests. In one example, a group was asked to research how romantic comedies promote Eurocentric classist and sexist power structures, and the students broke the assignment down into categories that included mainstream romantic comedies, off-beat rom-coms, television programmes, and Broadway musicals (Group B Nov. 13-21). Another assignment asked students to examine representations of GLBTTQ characters on television, and students analyzed their favourite programmes from *Law and Order* to *ER*. One member sought out culturally-specific representations, leading her/him to CBC's *Moccasin Flats* (Group A Oct. 10-23).

Blogging encouraged the aims of feminist participatory learning defined by Ngan-Ling Chow *et al.* taking into account the challenges posed by full ownership of the assignments and the inversion of classroom hierarchies (2003). It particularly enabled connectivity and collectivization in ways that more traditional tools do not. Students often wrote in a tone supported by blogs - personal postings that talked back in frustrated rants to different intersecting oppressions. Blogging allowed students to tell their stories whilst completing a research assignment. They engendered connections to real-world activism and between personal identity politics and class content. Students illustrated ownership when they shaped the questions in ways that interested them and through the many tones and subjects on the blogs from formally academic to frustrated and fanciful.

In this class, blogs proved to more successfully encourage collectivization and connectivity to the outside world than closed discussion pages, traditional papers, or class discussion as students were aware of being the objects of a public gaze and were able to use hypertext to immediately connect the subjects to the outside world. Blogs also generically encouraged personal connections to class assignments and an increased sense of ownership. Overall, blogs enabled the positive outcomes of participatory learning and in some areas exceeded more traditional classroom tools.

Endnote

1. Ethical approval was sought at my university and it was confirmed that research "based exclusively on publicly available information, documents, records, works,

performances, archival materials or third party interviews" does not require ethics approval. Further, the Chair of the Research Ethics Board confirmed that "research using information posted on blogs, which are publicly available, would not require research ethics approval."

I did set safeguards to protect students who chose to blog. Students were instructed about ethics and the *Privacy Act* so that they could make an informed decision. In particular, they were instructed on the public nature of publishing blogs and 'zines and potential outcomes and effects including: ideas being connected to specific authors if they did not use an anonymous name; people joining the blog discussion in potentially hostile ways; people commenting on the 'zines in other public spaces at the University; and journalists' use of blogs to do research for stories (Jiwani 2006). Students were reminded over two classes to use anonymous names, but most chose to use their own names, or a version of their own name.

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