

10

The importance of gender

Gill Kirkup

Gender: a culturally-shaped group of attributes and behaviours given to the female or male.
(Humm, 1989)

I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. (Haraway, 1991)

Introduction

In the 1980s a title such as mine would lead an audience to presume that I would be making an argument for recognising that gender difference is at least as significant a determinant of educational inequality as race and class difference; and that any democratic education system should recognise the particular needs of women students and staff. On a very pragmatic level I believe this still to be true and it informs much of my own activity as a distance educator. However, since the mid-1980s, both feminism and educational theory have been involved in coming to grips with some radical critiques of epistemology, which have made us re-examine the foundations of our thinking about what gender is, and *why* it is. All these critiques presume that gendering is a much more significant activity than simply the social persona of human beings. Gender is analysed as one of the foundational cultural categories of our intellectual world, providing an implicit framework on which aspects of our world are placed, almost arbitrarily, in dominant and subordinate oppositional categories.

These debates interest me for two main reasons. As an educator of women I need a model of the learner which helps me decide the significance of a student's gender in my day-to-day practice. As an educator working in open and distance learning (ODL) I need a model of the educational role of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) which takes seriously the social and cultural significance of gender.

In this chapter¹ I tell a kind of chronological story summarising a number of different theoretical understandings of gender and illustrate how these have influenced our understanding of women learners, particularly in ODL, although it may be that some of the most recent post-modernist theories have caused confusion, at least as much as they have provided insight. I will examine in particular Donna Haraway's concept of 'cyborg', which is proving more popular now than when it was first published in 1985 because it has such a strong resonance with much media theory about ICTs, and in particular theories about the social (and with that the educational) impact of the Internet. If ICTs are a radically different educational media from any we have previously known, or even, with respect to the Internet, a new *place* ('cyberspace') where education happens, we need to know whether gender has any reality there.

Gender: The simple story

The category 'women' has existed for as long as history; the category 'gender' applied to human beings is a much more recent historical development. As all first-year Women's Studies students learn, sex is a biological category, a problematic area perhaps for biologists and medicine, but not the focus of attention for feminist theory. At its simplest, 'gender' is defined as what society makes of sex (see Humm's 1989 definition above), and may in some circumstances not correspond with an individual's biological category. It is the existence of the concept of gender (rather than simply classifying men and women as different sexes) which makes it possible to raise questions about the social organisations which depend on gender; the power inequalities which seem to follow automatically from it, and the way our behaviour and social roles are circumscribed by it. Not least *by* and *in* education.

Gender was co-opted by feminist theory, from its original home in psychology, to explain the structural inequalities of men and women and the ideologies justifying these inequalities. It proved such a powerful explanatory theory that by the 1980s it was being used to explain the way knowledge (Harding, 1991; Fox Keller, 1986), and inanimate aspects of the material world such as technology (Cockburn and Furst Dilic, 1994; Wajcman, 1991) and physical space (Matrix, 1984) were 'gendered'. Gender identity was seen no longer as something simply ascribed or even coherent (Hollway, 1984), but the attribute of a more fluid subjectivity and a strategy for political action (Pratt, 1988). These increasingly complex reconceptions of gender have to be taken

¹This chapter was first presented as a paper at the conference, Putting the student first: Learner-centred approaches in open and distance learning, Churchill College, Cambridge, UK, 3-5 July, 1995.

Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning

into account when designing educational policies or activities to be student-centred, in particular for women, but for people of any gender.

In at the beginning: Women and ODL

ODL, and its forerunner correspondence education, has provided historically, for many women, perhaps their only chance to learn when other educational institutions were not open to them. One hundred and fifty years ago it was still acceptable to argue that girls and women did not have the physical and intellectual capacity to benefit from the same education as their male peers, despite the successful demonstration by many that, given half a chance, they certainly could. In 1840 when Isaac Pitman first offered what is now considered to be perhaps the first 'modern' distance learning course (in shorthand writing), it was, at least, open to women. Then, no women in Europe or the USA had access to university education and many had no schooling at all. Many women used non-traditional modes of learning where they were available. For example, Anna Ticknor created the very successful Society to Encourage Studies at Home in 1873, which provided distance education to adult women of all classes in the East Coast of the USA. This organisation provided instruction for up to 10 000 women and flourished for 24 years. It was praised in journals such as the *New York Tribune* and influenced the development of US correspondence education for both genders (Watkins, 1991).

In those early days women were also often the mediators of ODL for others. In rural areas of North America they were involved as the unpaid supervisors and tutors of their own children. Faith (1988), for example, describes how her grandparents—Canadian prairie homesteaders—used 'home study' as a significant part of the education of their twelve children. She quotes Bolton's discussion of this aspect of women's work in the private domain of their own homes:

One side effect of correspondence education which appears to have been less widely publicised than it deserved was its reliance on the labour of wives and mothers as supervisors and teachers. The new democracies have always tended to regard the transmission of culture as an interest for women. It was taken for granted that as the men of the household would be fully occupied with their farm duties, the children's mother would accept the responsibility of organising the receipt and dispatch of correspondence materials, overseeing the students to ensure that they got on with their assignments diligently and regularly, and in general fitting in the role of surrogate monitors with the thousand and one tasks of a busy pioneer wife. (Bolton, 1986, pp. 17–18, quoted in Faith, 1988)

In some countries where women are still, in 1995, seen as belonging to the

private sphere of the home and family, distance education offers them perhaps their only educational opportunity.

Gender in twentieth-century education

The twentieth century has seen the increased participation of women as students and staff in all sectors of education and in most countries. It has been argued that this increased participation contributed to the development of Second Wave feminism.² Part of the 'problem with no name' articulated by Friedan in the early 1960s (Friedan, 1963) was the mismatch between the ideology of meritocratic education and women's experience of life and work. Highly educated women suffered the greatest dissonance between their expectations and their lives, and some of them turned their considerable intellectual skills to developing and publishing new feminist theory.

Since the 1960s there has been considerable analysis of the 'gendering' of every sector of education. First, inequalities of access and provision for girls and boys were highlighted, then the exclusion of women from some fields of education and at higher levels. The primary focus of this analysis has been on the education systems of industrialised countries, but there is a recognition that although these inequalities can be seen empirically in almost every country in the world, the nature of them may differ between societies. This leads to different forms of action being appropriate in different countries; for example, the kind of education that women want the right to in developing countries is not the same as the changed curriculum that many feminists are arguing for in English-language education.

A critique has developed of what has been called 'liberal' gender equality theory, which is based on a liberal model of equal citizenship rights and benefits for men and women. In this liberal model, male values and activities are often implicitly seen as worthy and of high status, and the aim of educational gender equality is for women to have equal access to these same activities in order to achieve full citizenship, while the nature of that citizenship (i.e. that it might be constructed round the activities and needs of men) goes unquestioned. This kind of liberal theory, it is argued, contains an implicit model of women as *deficient*, because the only explanation it can give for why women *choose* not to study some subjects or to pursue the same career paths as men is that there is something wrong with women which has to be addressed via remedial initiatives.

²A distinction is made between First Wave feminism which is associated with the suffrage movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Second Wave feminism which was born as the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and now encompasses a range of politics and ideologies.

Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning

More radical views of gender equality have been developed which argue from a Marxist or Freirian perspective (Weiler, 1995), sometimes also called standpoint theory (Harding, 1989), that women, as the subordinate group in an unequal gender/class system, see the world in privileged and perhaps epistemologically more 'truthful' ways than the dominant group (men). Women are likely to have different values and different skills from the dominant group, and these are exhibited in different educational aims and the achievement of different educational outcomes. There is also a moral dimension to this argument: that the values and skills of the dominant group are about *domination*, and therefore *not* the ones that should be encouraged in an egalitarian democracy. These kinds of perspectives also support the role of education as 'consciousness-raising' for subordinate groups, so that any education based on them not only privileges students' personal experience, but is designed to contain activities which require *groups* of students to articulate personal experience.

This perspective has provided the rationale for a number of books which have explored the experience, in particular of adult women, in education. These are books which take as given the importance of experience above theory and are structured around personal narratives and interviews. For example, Thompson's book about women in adult and continuing education, *Learning liberation* (1983); Pascall and Cox's book, *Women returning to higher education* (1993); and Griffin's book, *Changing our lives: Doing Women's Studies* (1994). It is also this perspective which underlies many courses in which adult students, in particular, create personal biographies in the process of their study.

Some academics working from this perspective have argued that many of the activities and values that have previously been considered as low status and 'female' should be incorporated into a 'transformed' curriculum in order to produce an 'inclusive vision of human experience based on difference and diversity, not sameness and generalisation' (Schuster and van Dyne, 1984). For them, education is still the major agent of social transformation. However, others have been criticised for using personal experience and consciousness raising only as a tool for individual personal change, effectively depoliticising the activity. Another danger of this kind of activity is that an uncritical or even anti-intellectual attitude is adopted towards personal experience: that it is the 'truth' and that it is unchangeable.

Radical transformation or essentialism

A defence of the validity of women's experience, and an argument that women do live in a different intellectual world, came in the early 1980s with Gilligan's

The importance of gender

book, *In a different voice* (1982). This is a book about the moral development of women; it builds on a particular branch of psychoanalytic theory: object relations theory, in which women are seen as developing *different* ways of thinking and experiencing the world from men, rather than what had traditionally been seen as *less mature* ways:

The wish (of men) to be alone at the top and the consequent fear that others will get too close: the wish (of women) to be at the centre of connection and the consequent fear of being too far out on the edge. These disparate fears of being stranded and being caught give rise to different portrayals of achievement and affiliation, leading to different modes of action and different ways of assessing the consequences of choice. (Gilligan, 1982, p. 62)

This connected way of being for women comes, it is argued, out of a life in which one's relationships with others and the well-being of others are a crucial part of personal development. It is a positive way of being rather than an immature state on the road to 'separation' or 'independence', which is how it was previously described. Belenky *et al.* (1986) applied Gilligan's theoretical framework to understanding women's intellectual development and critiqued Perry's (1970) model of stages of intellectual development. They describe women as 'connected knowers' who, when they reach the highest stages of intellectual development, *equivalent to* but not the *same as* those described by Perry, continue to exhibit a strong sense of relatedness to others: something lacking in men at the same stage.

These theories have proved very useful in understanding in particular why women are alienated from some areas of science (Fox Keller, 1986) and certain kinds of computer use (Turkle and Papert, 1990), and why men and women seem to have different styles of communication (Tannen, 1990). However, they have been criticised as falling into the trap of 'essentialism'.

For many gender theorists, the strength of the concept 'gender' is that it describes the identity, roles and behaviour of men and women as socially constructed and therefore open to reconstruction and change. Gender theory has argued that the dualisms male/female are falsely dichotomous, and that they have been at the foundation of Western rationalist thought, along with a range of other similar false dualisms: nature/culture, rational/emotional, public/private, and many others (Fox Keller, 1986). Many theorists argued that to claim that women have particular female gender attributes due either to their biological functions, for example childbirth, or their psychological development, e.g. their relationship with their mothers, is to fall into the trap of seeing gender as something essential and therefore unchangeable. This would mean that men and women really are, in essence, different in ways that cannot be modified either by individual will or by social reorganisation. Gender is then a universal foundational category, and women have a unique female

Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning

nature. An automatic next step for some feminists is to say that since dualisms are never equal, this female nature is superior, or perhaps historically more useful to a twenty-first-century world, than traditional masculinity.

Those who have happily embraced this essentialist position include Mary Daly (1978; 1984), the theologian and poet; Susan Griffin (1978; 1982) and many others who would call themselves 'ecofeminists'; as well as some French psychoanalytic feminists such as Luce Irigaray (Whitford, 1992). It is the theoretical foundation for many politically active groups and is at least implicit in some branches of women's education. But it has also been criticised for trying to impose a universal interest among all women in a global context in which *differences* of race, class, age and location are arguably more significant than commonality.

There is of course the opposite development. From within a heterogeneous body of theory called feminist post-modernism has come the questioning of whether there is any material foundation to any of our linguistic categories, including the category 'gender'. Along with this comes a certain relativism with respect to epistemology.

Post-modernism puts forward a strong form of the 'different not universal' argument: that 'reality' is different for each individual since it is determined by that particular individual's social and historical location. There can be no meaningful universal categories; a universal category is simply the imposition of the perspective of a dominant group:

That is, only to the extent that one person or group can dominate the whole will reality appear to be governed by one set of rules or be constituted by one privileged set of social relations.
(Flax, 1990, p. 49)

Therefore the universal category 'woman' cannot mean the same to all people put into it. It can only be universal because it is defined in the interests of a dominant group (crudely identified as white, middle-class, able-bodied women). Its existence means that the perspectives and voices of others called 'women' are being silenced.

Gender theorists have looked for theories of gender difference and inequality that are, in complex ways, integrated with other systems of difference and inequality (the most usual ones discussed being race and class) in order to throw light on their entwined operation. However, most feel that abandoning 'gender' as an analytical concept, and with it the category 'woman', as having no universal application, both denies what has been achieved by using them and undermines any grounds for mass social or political action by or for women.

However, the problem remains: how to break through the constraints imposed by a world of dualism, without falling into the trap of complete relativism?

The importance of gender

As long as gender is the axis along which our world is subject to division, women will have more of an incentive to count past two—or even perhaps between one and two—than most men will, even though they may still have trouble doing so. That extra incentive derives from the particular costs they bear in a world limited to either unitarity or duality [that is either having to be like men or different from them]. (Fox Keller, 1986, p. 51)

Attempts to leap over this duality have been few. The particular one that I will return to later is that of Donna Haraway (1985; 1991) who suggests that if we are willing to stop thinking in dualist terms about the natural and manmade; living organisms and machines; and see ourselves as beings in symbiosis with machines—as cyborgs—we can achieve social and individual liberation from gender duality. If this is true, then ODL as it increasingly uses ICTs could have a key role in supporting this relationship. First, I want to review the way writers and researchers in ODL have used gender theory.

Working on gender in ODL

It has taken ODL some time to build on the work of gender theorists, even on similar work in other areas of education. Elizabeth Burge and Karlene Faith (Faith, 1988) were the first to edit and publish an international collection of essays about gender issues in ODL. Until then the sum total of published articles in *Teaching at a Distance* and *Distance Education*, which took gender as a substantive issue for ODL, was six (Burge, 1988). The Faith collection reviewed the participation of women in ODL in a variety of developed and developing countries, demonstrating that gender equality had not been achieved with respect to access, performance, or curriculum provision in most countries. It gave examples of initiatives to improve access for women, some of which were based on a liberal equality model, others on more radical views, including some which made a critique of the curriculum as gendered. Some authors were beginning to argue that the particular intellectual strengths of women as well as their learning needs were not yet recognised.

Since then there has been a steady, but small, flow of publications containing research findings and theoretical discussion about the nature of gender issues in ODL. In 1993 the University of Umea in Sweden brought together a small number of people with a specialist interest in women's education in ODL, at the first conference dedicated to gender and ODL: *Feminist pedagogy and women-friendly perspectives in distance education* (Women's Studies Centre of Umea, 1993). An issue of *Open Praxis* in 1994 (*Open Praxis*, 1994, Vol. 1) gave space to reviewing the situation for women staff and students in the years since the publication of the Faith book (see for example Taylor and Kirkup, 1994). Of the other authors who have written in the area, Von Prümmer and Burge are

Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning

perhaps the most prolific. Von Prümmer writes about women in ODL in Germany (Von Prümmer, 1993a; 1993b; Von Prümmer and Rossie, 1990a; 1990b). Burge uses Gilligan (1982) and Belenky *et al.* (1986) to theorise the learning needs of women students and especially their relationship to computer-mediated communication (Burge, 1988; 1990; 1993; Burge and Lenskyi, 1990). In 1994 Patricia Lunneborg published the first 'experiential' collection of life histories of women studying at the OU UK: *OU women: undoing educational obstacles* (1994). Most recently, Kanwar and Jagannathan have edited a collection of essays about the particular situation of women in distance education in India: *Speaking for ourselves* (Kanwar and Jagannathan, 1995).

Before the Faith book there had been a commonly accepted view that ODL is a type of education that is particularly suited to women (for example see McIntosh *et al.*, 1976). The historical material previously discussed suggests that this view was reasonably founded in the knowledge that adult women have many more restrictions on their time and mobility than do adult men, as well as less access to disposable income, which made ODL the most practical option for post-school education. However, there is often an implicit presumption that, apart from these material factors, women are the same as men with respect to their motivations to study and their intellectual styles, as well as their domestic circumstances.

A gender analysis of the power relations within families has demonstrated the very different experiences men and women have of that same institution. Women's lives are also changing. In industrialised countries 'full-time housewives' are now a minority of women distance education students. A survey at the Fernuniversität found nearly half the women students were in full-time paid work compared with three-quarters of the men (Von Prümmer and Rossie, 1990a). At the OU UK, similarly, only 20 per cent of women undergraduate students are full-time housewives; of the rest the majority classify themselves as in full-time work. Most of our women students are very busy, at least as busy as their partners, if not more so. A national UK survey on leisure estimated that full-time working women had 3.3 hours of free time on weekdays, compared with 4.5 hours for men; and 10.3 hours at weekends compared with 12.1 hours for men (*Social Trends*, 1992).

Unequal power relations in a family can produce an absence of support for women students:

Many women distance education students report an increase in the demands their partners and children make on them, while men often mention being relieved of household and childcare duties, being given uninterrupted time and space for studying, and having other active help from their partners such as the typing of term papers and assignments or the locating of literature. It seems that women do not have the same right as men to pursue their education, especially when this could interfere with their role as mothers and wives.

The importance of gender

One of the problems our women students report time and again is the phenomenon that they themselves start setting higher standards in their domestic and mothering roles. They feel they 'owe' it to their families, their friends and relatives, or their neighbours to be even better mothers and partners and to have even cleaner homes in compensation for 'being allowed' to pursue their own interests and in an attempt to make up for the consequent 'neglect' of their domestic responsibilities. Male students do not report this type of conflict of interest in their private lives, although they might regret the necessity to cut back on the time spent with their families. (Von Prümmer, 1993a, p. 15)

In the 1980s there was a great deal of debate about independent learning in ODL (Gaskell and Mills, 1989). It sometimes appeared that the ideal type of ODL student is one who gets a degree in the minimum of time and makes the minimum of demands on an institution for support: the 'turbo-student' (Von Prümmer, 1993b). This returns us to a model in which women are less likely to approximate to the ideal: a deficit model of women students. Although arguments can be made that women have special needs for personal contact with tutorial staff or support networks, they are seen as psychologically dependent, that is more 'needy' than men, rather than as individuals who have communication and affiliation skills which are valuable and need to be exercised in particular ways.

Christine Von Prümmer and I carried out a large-scale survey of students at the OU UK and the Fernuniversität (Kirkup and Von Prümmer, 1990). We argued from our empirical data that we could identify differences in the preferred learning styles of men and women which made them respond differently to different ODL methods. In both institutions women were more likely to be frequent attenders at study centres, despite having more obstacles to getting there such as less access to transport and more domestic responsibility. Women valued the range of services provided at study centres more highly than men, in particular the opportunity to meet other students. Women were more likely than men to involve others, e.g. family and friends, in their learning. Most significantly, although roughly the same proportions of men and women reported feeling isolated, this was a problem for 24 per cent of the men, compared with 40 per cent of the women. We based our analysis on Gilligan (1982) to argue that this discomfort with isolation was not necessarily associated with negative personal circumstances, but emerges from a desire for connection with others.

Using this same model, we have begun to look at the different attitudes that men and women students have towards the new (and old) ODL technologies that we are all experimenting with—if not fully committed to—in our various institutions (Kirkup and Von Prümmer, 1994; Von Prümmer, 1995). The model we have used is certainly not post-modernist and is open to criticism that it could be interpreted as essentialist. The question is whether it is supported by