Negotiating a Hegemonic Discourse of Computing

Hilde Corneliussen
University of Bergen, Norway

INTRODUCTION

The number of women within computer sciences is low in Norway, as in other Western countries (Camp & Gürer, 2002). Research projects have documented that girls and women use the computer less and in other ways than boys and men (Håpnes & Rasmussen, 2003). Even though variations between women and between men also have been documented through research, a dualistic image of gender and ICT has dominated throughout the 1990s (Corneliussen, 2003b). Worries about the "gender gap" related to computers have resulted in a number of initiatives to include girls and women in the "information society," but in order to do this in a successful manner we need knowledge about what it means to be a man or a woman with a relation to computers. How do men and women construct their own relations to computing?

BACKGROUND

This article presents a study of how male and female computer students perceive gender as meaningful in relation to computing, and how they create their own relations to computing (Corneliussen, 2003a).[1]

Empirical Material

The empirical material of the project is based on a study of seven men and 21 women who were students in a programming course[2] at the Department of Humanistic Informatics at the University of Bergen. During a period of three months, they were observed while working in the computer lab, they answered weekly questions on e-mail, including questions about their relation to computing, and most of them were interviewed in groups.

Gender

Gender is a social construction that gives norms, rules, and guidelines for men and women. Gender is experienced and performed by men and women. Simone de Beauvoir's description of gender as "what we do about what the world does to us" (Moi, 1999, p. 72) illustrates how gender is both a structure that we meet in the world, as well as what we do about it. Thus, in the main section, we will first look at how men and women *perceive* that gender has a meaning related to computers, and second, how they find their own positions as computer users.

Discourse Theory

The most important theoretical perspective in the project is poststructuralist feminist theory, mainly inspired by the historian Joan W. Scott's insistence on studying gender as a discursive structure (Scott, 1988). The analytical tool applied in this project has been elaborated through this theoretical perspective, with a special focus on cultural production of meaning, inspired by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory of discourse (1985). Two important concepts in the following presentation are "discourse" and "subject position." The concept of discourse refers to a limited and temporarily fixed meaning within one particular area—like the discourse of computing. Subject position refers to a discursive point of identification within a discourse. While a discourse gives the guidelines for how to understand a phenomenon, the subject position gives guidelines for the individual, about expected or accepted behaviour. The individual can either associate with, negotiate or reject a subject position.

Copyright © 2006, Idea Group Inc., distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of IGI is prohibited.

A HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE

Research has documented that there are differences in how men and women's relations to computing are perceived (Lagesen Berg, Gansmo, Hestflått, Lie, Nordli, & Sørensen, 2002). This is also evident in this project; all the informants shared a series of conceptions of how gender and computing were related. Together, these conceptions comprise a "hegemonic discourse" which seems to suppress other and alternative conceptions about gender and computing.

A central part of this hegemonic discourse is the different expectations towards men and women's relations to the computer. Men are expected to have interest, experience and knowledge about computers, while women are expected *not* to have the same interest, experience, and knowledge. Men and women are also expected to engage in different activities; men in activities associated with the technical machine and playing with the computer, while women are expected to use the computer for a specific purpose, and for a limited number of tasks.

The hegemonic discourse thus creates two distinct subject positions; one associated with the computer skilled man, and one associated with the less computer skilled woman. It is important to emphasize that a subject position is not a description of "real" men and women, but rather a description of the *expectations* towards men and women. People use these expectations towards themselves and towards others. This does not mean that the individual always is in harmony with the discourse, a point further demonstrated in the following chapter.

NEGOTIATING THE HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE

All the informants articulate their own individual ways to describe or position themselves in relation to computing. However, by looking at how these positions are articulated it is possible to point to a pattern of seven different *positioning strategies*. A starting point for all the different strategies is the hegemonic discourse, but they differ from each other with regard to the position they aim at, and thereby also with regard to the degree of harmony with the hegemonic discourse. We will first look at the three positioning strategies among the men, before we turn to the women's strategies.

MALE POSITIONING STRATEGIES

"Rooted in a Room for Men"

In the first positioning strategy, the men have "roots in a room for men." They can display harmony with the masculine subject position in the hegemonic discourse. They have experience with computers since childhood, and they have a lot of knowledge about computers. They conform to many of the expectations towards men in the hegemonic discourse; they have acquired their own experience "together with the boys" and "as one of the boys." A close relation between boys and computers is described as "natural," and one of them even thinks that "people almost expect that a boy studies computing." This group of men use the hegemonic discourse as a positive reference to their own relation to the computer.

"Aiming at a Room for Men"

The next group of men is also aiming at "a room for men," but they can not display the same harmony with the masculine subject position. That is, except for being men. They do not have very much experience or knowledge about computers prior to the computer course, but to acquire more knowledge seems to be something that they have wanted, and it gives them a more "proper" relation to the computer. Expectations about men's close relationship with the computer becomes a positive force in their own relation to the computer. One of them thinks that he learns tasks on the computer faster because of "the 'taken for granted' assumption that computers are something I can-handle, because I am a boy." Another one illustrates how he might be associated with the masculine subject position without really being qualified, and he is able to "hide" in this position. This positioning strategy clearly demonstrates how men have the *possibility* of being associated with computer competence and a positive relation to the computer purely based on gender.

4 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/negotiating-hegemonic-discourse-computing/12850

Related Content

Partnership Global IT Business
Mary Kirk (2009). *Gender and Information Technology: Moving Beyond Access to Co-Create Global Partnership (pp. 239-259).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/partnership-global-business/18812

Dualisms and Stereotypes: Tools of Domination
Mary Kirk (2009). *Gender and Information Technology: Moving Beyond Access to Co-Create Global Partnership (pp. 37-61).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/dualisms-stereotypes-tools-domination/18804

The Social Construction of Australian Women in IT
Sue Nielsenand Liisa von Hellens (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 1105-1111).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/social-construction-australian-women/12879

Professional Socialization in STEM Academia and its Gendered Impact on Creativity and Innovation
Gloria-Sophia Warmuthand Edeltraud Hanappi-Egger (2014). *Gender Considerations and Influence in the Digital Media and Gaming Industry (pp. 156-174).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/professional-socialization-in-stem-academia-and-its-gendered-impact-on-creativity-and-innovation/110637

Approaches to Conceptualizing Gender
Darryl Coulthardand Tanya Castletan (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 31-36).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/approaches-conceptualizing-gender/12711