Chapter 7.6
Discourses in Gender and Technology:
Taking a Feminist Gaze

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ABSTRACT

The majority of women are not involved in the design, manufacturing or shaping of technology in many Western societies. This is at a time when governments globally see technology as an enabler to economic success. Using feminist scholarship and discourse analysis, this chapter questions why patterns of gender segregation prevail in technology related fields in the United Kingdom. The chapter critically analyses why government policy, and equal opportunities initiatives, have so far largely failed to increase women's participation. Using examples taken from two educational settings, the chapter uses the narratives of individual's experiences of technology, their engagement, or lack of engagement with it, to examine the dominant discourses of the field. It is argued that technology discourses, which shape our understanding and identity with technology, are gendered. It is argued that current policies and initiatives, based on giving women equality of access will continue to make little difference. Until gendered dominant discourses of technology are deconstructed and examined; we will not have the tools to address the current situation of gender segregation.

The Connection between masculinity and technology, reflected in women's under-representation in engineering, and indeed in all scientific and technical institutions, remains strong as we enter a new era of technological change. (Wajcman, 2004)

INTRODUCTION

Globally, governments see new technologies as the enabler of economic success in the global knowledge economy.[1] At the same time the United Kingdom, along with many other Western societies, is experiencing a gender divide in relation to the use, development and design of information and communication technologies (ICT). For some time it has been recognized that males dominate the use of technologies in all areas of British society (DFEE, 2001; Hellawell, 2001; Wilkinson, 2001) and that gender segregation in ICT occupations persists (EOC, 2004a). Only a few girls are taking

up computing at an advanced level at school, and universities are experiencing a continued lack of interest in applications by women for computing degree programs (Alexander, 2001b; EOC, 2005). In 1996, 19% of computer science students were reported to be female. Today, there has been little improvement; females account for only 20% of computing graduates in Great Britain (EOC, 2005). In the workplace, women hardly feature in the innovation and production of technology and the computing industry is concerned about the lack of women in the sector. British industry continues to experience major skills shortages of technicians and ICT professionals (DFEE, 2001; EOC 2004b). This is contrary to images in the popular press of women—such as Martha Lane Fox, the co-founder of lastminute.com—who are hailed as heroines of the dot.com industry. In reality men dominate e-commerce start-ups, and there is little involvement of women at the investment level of the industry (Hellawell, 2001). There are signs that women are not involved in the new economy and the new technologies, and "that men are firmly in the driving seat" (Wilkinson, 2001). This has not gone undetected, nor has it been ignored. Over a number of years the lack of women's participation in science and technology has been addressed in various United Kingdom government policies and initiatives. However, neither the government nor industry has set specific targets in relation to women entering these male dominated industries (EOC, 2004). Gender segregation still prevails and women are still under-represented in the field of technology.

This chapter begins by looking at the emphasis that the United Kingdom government, along with others around the globe, place on the new technologies in relation to the global knowledge economy. The discussion moves on to look at why the current situation of gender segregation is thought to prevail. I present here a critical analysis of government policy and initiatives based on giving equal opportunities to women, most of which have so far largely failed to increase the participation of women. I then introduce feminist theory and discourse analysis to look at "discourses of technology." Focusing on examples from two educational settings, I use the discussions of individuals' experiences of technology, their process of engagement, or lack of engagement, with the technology. The aim is to demonstrate that issues of gender and technology are by no means simple. I suggest we should not just focus on giving women equal opportunities to access, training and education in technology, we should instead try to identify and understand more clearly how the dominant discourses around technology come to shape our understanding and identity with technology. It is this I suggest that needs deconstructing before we can address patterns of gender segregation.

ICT AND THE GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Technology and innovation feature highly in future economies, and are seen by governments in the United Kingdom and around the globe to be an essential ingredient to becoming internationally competitive (Brooks & Mackinnon, 2001). Training the population in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is seen as a powerful enabler. The lack of access to ICTs does not only lead to exclusion from the new technologies but also to exclusion from the new knowledge economy (Castells, 2000). Training members of society to be computer literate is regarded as essential to participation in the current and future labor market. In government rhetoric about "education" there is a shift in emphasis from being purely concerned with the education of individuals, to a need to ensure the population has the essential skills that will assist with the nation's wealth creation (Brooks & Mackinnon, 2001; Coffield, 1999). This raises issues about what type of knowledge and skills will be valued by society in the future. It suggests that those

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