

Chapter 15

Towards a Feminist Manifesto for E-Learning: Principles to Inform Practices*

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that the future development of European e-learning needs to be informed by gender theory, and feminist and other critical pedagogies. The authors explore four themes that have been important in gender theory: embodiment, knowledge, power and ethics, and illustrate how these would give a new and more critical perspective for future e-learning developments, and for social progress if they were incorporated into educational policy and practice. The chapter ends with a framework for using this analysis to inform future action, expressed as the first draft of a manifesto.

INTRODUCTION: WHY DO WE NEED A MANIFESTO?

Why do we need a feminist manifesto for e-learning? A manifesto is a call for action. A feminist manifesto for e-learning is a call for action for the development

and use of e-learning driven by a feminist agenda which places 'gender' as a central explanatory concept for understanding inequality and difference in educational systems, pedagogy and learning. In this chapter we review what we consider to be the main arguments and justifications for e-learning in higher education in particular – which is the field

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in which we, the authors, all work. We illustrate these arguments through some of the most recent e-learning activities and applications. The list of our affiliations at the top of this chapter indicates that we work in a number of different countries. What it does not show is that we come from different disciplines: computer science, educational technology, psychology, and gender studies. In working together on a framework for a feminist manifesto for e-learning what we clearly had in common was our underlying explanatory gender theories. However, we found that our disciplines and the four different languages we work in meant that we often used different words to describe the same thing, or that the words we were using had different connotations for us. This has involved us in long discussions about our writing, and we have decided in the end to leave alternative words and expressions in the paper, in the hope that this will increase accessibility without causing confusion.

One set of values that we hold in common are those of feminist pedagogy. These are a set of values and practices which were developed by gender studies teachers and feminist educators in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The five main practices that we consider to be central to feminist pedagogy are:

- Reformation of the relationship between professor and student
- Empowerment of all participants
- Building communities through education
- Respect for the diversity of personal experience
- Challenging traditional views (of knowledge, curricula and values)

However, although we use e-learning technologies in our own pedagogy and we are involved in other aspects of theorizing the impact of digital technologies on gender and lived experience, we felt that the principles and practices of feminist pedagogy and the practices of e-learning had

never been integrated. This is the task we have set ourselves, a task for which this chapter forms the first stage. The creation of a manifesto, we felt, would provide a focus to bring together our developing ideas, and the conclusions of this chapter comprise a draft of theses for our feminist manifesto for e-learning.

In this chapter we argue that neither the justifications made for state investment in e-learning in Europe nor most e-learning activities themselves are informed by critical thinking about feminist pedagogy or feminist theory; if these were applied, they would produce an evaluative perspective which would make e-learning a better tool for knowledge production and for social change. This is especially important in a twenty first century Europe, where the permeability of previously rigid national borders inside Europe and the influx of workers from outside have created a diverse and mobile population. The success of this new European depends on its ability to capitalize on the dynamic potential of this diverse population, rather than excluding or marginalizing them. Understanding gender diversity and implementing gender equality action initiatives can provide a model of inclusion that can be applied to other aspects of diversity.

We focus our discussion on four issues that have received significant attention from feminist scholars outside the field of education: embodiment, knowledge, power, and ethics, and explore what a serious consideration of these issues might mean if applied to e-learning pedagogy. We selected these issues in particular because they directly influence the way we look at teaching, learning and technology. They are not an exhaustive list of all possible issues but they provide what we consider to be key planks for a platform to debate what should be the key principles for critical inclusive e-learning.

The idea of a manifesto is a familiar one, but for many of us manifestos belong to history, like the 'Communist Manifesto' of Marx and Engels (1848), or to party politics. Political parties pro-

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