Chapter 12

Computer Courses in Adult Education in a Gender Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this study of computer courses in municipal adult education, 173 questionnaires from 10 Swedish adult education centres with students taking a basic computer education course were analyzed. The main findings were that men consistently reported greater computer competence, while computer interest or computer attitudes did not show gender differences. The gender differences in computer competence were significant even in the youngest age group. Young women were also the most distinctive group by being the most dissatisfied. The idea that gender issues in adult computer education mainly concern computer reticent middle aged women while young women attend computer courses on a more equal footing with men does not hold in this sample. The results raise some practical questions, particularly in assessing the differences in computer competence and women's feelings of inadequacy, taking advantage of women's computer interest, and coming into terms with young women's expectations.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A gender gap in computing—a digital divide between women and men (Cooper & Weaver, 2003; Wilson et al, 2003), even in western society—has been troubling researchers and policymakers; firstly, because women are seen as being at risk of being left behind in the new citizenship, and, secondly, because computer competence is essential in a well-qualified workforce. However, today 60% of Swedish women and 69% of Swedish men use a computer daily, either at home or at work (Statistics Sweden, 2006). The picture of women as not being interested in computers and computer competence does not hold true any more. Women do use computers, and they also enrol on computer courses. But how are these courses functioning for the students—men and women? Do women and men come to the course with similar interests and similar knowledge? What about different age

groups? These are the questions that this study tries to answer.

This is a study of computer students in Swedish municipal adult education centres. The main focus is on the differences between men and women, and between women of different ages when it comes to their interest in and experiences of computers and computer education.

ADULT EDUCATION, WOMEN AND COMPUTERS

Women and Men in Adult Education

Few studies on adult education have been conducted from a gender perspective (Rogers, 2005) and the situation is not much better in Sweden. One exception is the work of Hägerström (2004), who conducted an observational and interview study in one municipal adult education centre.

There have been a number of studies of gender related to computer education, computer use, and attitudes to computers, but very few have been conducted in an adult education setting. One positive exception is the studies reported by the SIGIS group (Lie & Sörensen, 2003, Rommes, Faulkner & van Slooten, 2005). The studies made about gender and computer education have normally dealt with schoolchildren, adolescents and university students (for example, Upitis, 1998; Clift et al, 2001; Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Colley & Comber, 2003; Hartzel, 2003; Broos & Roe, 2006; Fuller & Meiners, 2005). They have repeatedly established that girls and women either are more reticent towards computers than boys and men, or they are perceived to be so by their teachers. Another way to interpret these findings is that women have other requirements than men on computers, computer education and the introduction of computers to their daily lives, but that their preferences are not respected by the male-dominated IT professionals, or male computing teachers, leading to a marginalization of women in computer education.

Adult education is different from other educational settings. Many students in adult education are middle-aged and have families. Women have often prioritized their family while men have prioritized employment (Ahrenkiel et al., 1998; Crossan et al, 2003). This extends even into the field of education. While the expressed aim of most students is to improve their qualifications or to get a job, men emphasize the qualification aspect and see the education in more instrumental terms while women tend to enjoy learning in itself and the social aspects of education. Hayes (2001) found that for women, education can bring new insights about their old roles and identities, and can thus involve much more profound changes than simply competence development.

For women studying computing, however, there often seems to exist an initial problem of self-esteem, and several authors (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Green & Keeble, 2001; Lior, 2001; Faulkner & Kleif, 2003; Fuller & Meiners, 2005; Rommes, 2003) stress the importance of building up women's self-esteem to engage them in learning, both in general and with computer subjects in particular. Some of these studies (Green & Keeble, Lior, 2001, Faulkner & Kleif, 2003) have also found that female teachers are essential for the success of women learners.

Illeris (2003) divides students in Danish adult education into three age groups: those over 45–50 years of age, those between 25–30 and 45–50, and those under 25–30. In Denmark, as well as in Sweden, municipal adult education is both something you can engage in voluntarily, for example to improve your possibilities in the labour market, but also something that can be strongly recommended by the authorities if you are unemployed. According to Illeris, the oldest group sees education from a worker perspective: it is a shame to be without a job and to have to take to education instead; the teacher takes the place of the work leader and tells you what to do—and for doing what you are told, you get your salary/benefit. The middle group tends to think

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