

Chapter 22

Women, Information and Communication Technologies, and Lifelong Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter arises from the authors' research interests in gender and adult learning in the community, with a special focus on how gender is enacted in communities of practice such as nonprofit women's organizations. These organizations play a key role in adult learning—nonformally through workshops and programs and informally through mentoring, collaboration, and information sharing. They also work informally and incidentally through advocacy work for social change to redress systemic gender-based discrimination. This chapter assesses how well the services and learning that happen in this context have evolved with the adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) by women's groups, in this case organizational websites. The authors place this discussion within the context of a small but growing literature examining the integration of ICTs within community development. In addition, we draw on feminist theoretical understandings and critiques of technology as it affects the lives of women. Although ICTs provide opportunities to further the cause of gender equality globally, inequalities persist to limit the realization of this potential.

INTRODUCTION

Those who work in the nonprofit sector acknowledge that much of the informal learning for women happens in and through community interactions. Through myriad organizations and nonprofit groups, women engage in mentoring, tutoring, and

various forms of continuing education. Nonprofit feminist and other women's organizations, ranging from craft guilds to charities, play a key role in community-based lifelong learning. For the purpose of this chapter, feminist organizations are broadly defined as those groups and agencies that typically have a political mandate to work for women's rights and to change the inequalities that exist in civil society (Ferree & Martin, 1995).

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Feminist organizations provide structured and unstructured learning opportunities and share information on issues ranging from self-esteem and personal development to advocacy on structural injustices that perpetuate poverty and violence.

This chapter revisits the role of women's organizations in community-based lifelong learning and examines the place of ICTs in the services and activities these groups engage in. The authors draw from a spectrum of current research to develop the intersection of nonprofit organizations, women's learning, feminist theoretical contributions to the study of gender and technology, and community development, notably the recent contribution of community informatics to lay out an understanding of the use of ICTs specifically in communities.

Although definitions of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) vary, most refer broadly to the range of technologies created to facilitate communications and information sharing. Typically these technologies are computer-mediated forms such as the Internet, including email and the World Wide Web (popularly called *the net* or *web*). They also may refer to mobile phones, handheld computing devices, or even pre-computer technologies such as community radio (Hafkin & Huyer, 2006).

While learning occurs informally throughout a person's life, it is rare to see a focus in the literature on informal learning through initiatives promoting ICT skill attainment (Faulkner & Lie, 2007). Most of the available literature that deals with the potential and usage of ICTs in education focuses on formal learning environments—classroom technology as a supplement face to face interactions, distance e-learning, instructional methods, performance assessment, course evaluations, and so on.

Nonprofit literature draws out the particularities of what makes nonprofits distinct from business in their use of ICTs and focuses on the issues that charitable—often volunteer-led—organizations face in adopting complex technologies as they fulfill their service mandates. Many feminist

organizations now use ICTs to communicate to women, educate and lobby about relevant issues, provide information, and promote services and events. ICTs have the potential to be an integral part of this overall mandate of education and learning for women. Feminist analyses of technology have ranged from the utopian to dystopian. Proponents champion the opportunities ICTs can bring to women's organizing potential, while critics highlight the inherent masculinist biases that serve to ensure the majority of women remain excluded, or at best, restricted to the "consumer-end" of new technologies. While this gendered analysis helps to uncover hidden biases, there is the concern that some critiques simply reinforce gender stereotypes, as writers such as Hayes and Flannery (2000) note in their studies on women and learning. This ambivalent relationship clearly affects the ways women's groups take on ICTs in daily practice. Community informatics is useful in this context as it is an interdisciplinary field studying the practical application of ICTs at the community level. The focus of informatics is on multiple layers ranging from the technology itself (design, bandwidth), through the ability to use technology (training, access), to the underlying issues including the policy environment, and on through to funding. Community informatics strives for a critical understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by the adoption or adaptation of ICTs to further the work of communities (Gurstein, 2004).

The fundamental challenge anchoring this analysis is to explore why community groups should integrate ICT usage into their activities at all. Given the hailed potential of technology-mediated opportunities for people to increase their interaction with each other, it is time to step back and critically reflect on the ways citizens are shaping or are being shaped by technology, and to what degree citizens are to believe its promise. The focus of this chapter then is the use of organizational websites, and the roles they play as extensions of the work of physically and

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