Chapter 11
Gendered Distance Education Spaces:
"Keeping Women in Place"?

Annika Bergviken Rensfeldt
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Sandra Riomar
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This chapter problematizes how gender is constructed and used in the arguments of flexible distance education. By using a gender and space analysis we destabilise the open, flexible and liberating features of distance higher education spaces, that are supposed to favour women. The questions are; How are the spaces of distance education gendered, and What power asymmetries are produced? The empirical material is Swedish education policies, mainly from the 1990s, concerned with the issue of creating new educational opportunities through a more open and flexible higher education. The chapter provides insights into the gender power asymmetries of these educational spaces through three lines of arguments: gendered technology use, off-campus studies and the home as place for learning. It is concluded that these spaces are characterized by enclosure and restrictions that risk "keeping women in place", and thus need to be questioned and challenged by feminist readings.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education as a form of organizing and distributing education more or less independently of time and space has been a recurrent feature in the Western world. Built on beliefs about the potential for widening access and enhancing learning opportunities, distance education has gained new interest and significance in modern society. More open and flexible ways of offering education have become a common rhetorical argument and the traditional places of learning have been challenged by, for example, IT-based study forms where dualities such as on-campus/off-campus, private/public are increasingly intertwined and blurred (Clarke et al., 2002; Edwards & Clarke, 2002; Edwards & Usher, 2007; Usher, 2002). The argument is that new opportunities for learning would be made available through such changes.

Due to their supposedly strong commitment to the places and the inflexible circumstances of their lives, women are often put forward as a group who would gain from studying in a distance, flexible, mode of study. In this chapter we problematize how gender is constructed and used in the arguments of flexible distance education by using illustrations from Swedish education policy documents, mainly from the 1990s. As an opening example, the Swedish Ministry of Education and Science (hereafter SME, 1998b, pp. 80-82) argues, on the issue of "Women and men in distance teaching", as follows:

The fact that it is possible to combine studying at a distance with housework and childbirth has led to distance education sometimes being pointed out as especially suitable for women. (p. 81)

We consider this as a part of how gender operates in distance education practices, to produce traditional female and male positionings.[1] Women are assumed to be physically bound to certain activities and places associated with the home. Our point is that this gendered ordering is a part of a spatial politics of distance education which needs to be problematized because of the asymmetries and assumptions that are illustrated here. We are asking in what senses could distance education be regarded as a gendered space and whether there are implications of distance education that disadvantage or "keep women in place"? In this text, we elaborate on this spatial dimension of distance education in relation to Swedish higher education by using policy material from 1998 (SME, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c)[2]. We also relate these policy documents to Swedish education policies from other older and more recent epochs concerning the issues of distance and higher education reform (SME[3], 1962; Swedish Government Bill, 2002, 2005).

AIM, QUESTIONS AND APPROACH

We intend to analyse the spatial politics of Swedish distance higher education by using the feminist geographer Doreen Massey's (1994, 1999a, 1999b, 2004) conceptualization of space as articulated in relation to time, place and gender. According to Massey, space is more than merely physical localities and geographies. Rather, space is a construction, made up of relations with place and time. The approach challenges common understandings of space either as metaphorical and symbolic spaces or as concrete, physical places. Such constructions tend to fix meanings and our understandings of spaces. Instead, Massey argues, it is more relevant to elaborate on how aspects of space/place intersect and are co-produced. The spatial analysis contrasts with a more commonly used understanding of space as a physical container in which actions take place in time. For Massey (1999a) the concern is:

to understand space (and space-time) as constituted through the social, rather than as dimensions defining an arena within which the social takes place. (p. 262)

In our example, the open, flexible spaces associated with distance education are seen as metaphorical spaces that are shaped mutually with place connotations and gender. These together constitute particular, gendered spaces.

Clarke and Edwards (Clarke et al., 2002; Edwards & Clarke, 2002) have also used Massey's work when examining the "changing places" associated with flexible, lifelong learning. They problematize the metaphorical uses of open, liberating spaces in the context of British further education colleges that have been organized to be more flexible. Rather than relating to discourses of flexibility, students tend to desire traditionally enclosed educational places, above all the renowned campus, in which they can be firmly located on "the inside". We take their analytical

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