

Chapter 13

Gendered Knowledge Production in Universities in a Web 2.0 World

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the access women have had historically to engage in knowledge production as university scholars or students. It discusses the changing nature of knowledge production in universities, and the impact of some Web 2.0 tools on this activity. It asks, through a detailed discussion of wikis and blogging if Web 2.0 tools can challenge the traditional gendering of university knowledge production.

INTRODUCTION

Universities, traditionally, have been concerned principally with two main functions: research or the production of knowledge, and teaching or its dissemination and acquisition. Universities are, and have been historically, the central knowledge institutions of the modern state, although significantly, they pre-date the development of the nation-state. (Peters, 2007, p 21)

This chapter is concerned with gender and the knowledge production function of universities. Phrases

like the ‘knowledge economy’ the ‘knowledge society’ and ‘knowledge workers’ are familiar twenty first century concepts in discussions about the role of education, and higher education in particular. Digital technologies have been important drivers of the knowledge society (Castells, 2000), where the production and exchange of knowledge is a major economic activity and they have been a force for change in universities. Political forces challenge universities to provide wider access to a larger proportion of the population; this is sometimes called ‘massification’. Ideological forces, in particular the commodification of knowledge, put an emphasis on efficiency and quantifiable measures of quality in the production and distribution of knowledge (Lyotard, 1984; Delanty, 1998; Peters, 2007), and

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have had a dramatic impact on the work of scholars and researchers. Technological forces in the form of digital tools and systems to support learning, scholarship, research and assessment, are drivers for change and support political and ideological forces. Digital technologies have been seen as the tools to enable economies of scale in research and teaching and to measure outputs of various kinds (Kirkup, 2009). There is little gender analysis of these changes and in particular of the impact of what are known as Web 2.0 technologies on the social role of universities as creators, defenders and disseminators of knowledge. This is surprising given the radical critiques of higher education by feminist academics in the later years of the twentieth century.

Feminist scholars have criticized universities as being historically gendered places of knowledge production, and for producing gendered knowledge (May, 2008). In the last fifty years universities have changed the gendered composition of their students and workforce. Academia is now a more welcoming profession for women. The increasing numbers of women working in universities (see HESA, 2008 for UK universities), as well as the fact that in the USA and Europe women make up over 50% of university students, has contributed to the notion of the ‘feminization of education’; a criticism that higher education is now an activity that appeals to women and girls rather than to men and boys¹. Is it possible that the increase in numbers of women, plus the opportunities provided by new digital forms of knowledge production, are creating a feminization of knowledge production, or at least a challenge to the hegemonic male activity of university knowledge production?

This chapter looks particularly at Web 2.0 applications that might offer ways to create and share knowledge; ways which support the ideals of critical and feminist pedagogy (see Kirkup et al, 2010), and challenge gendered knowledge production (Harding, 1991, Haraway, 1997) It looks in particular at ‘wikis’ and ‘blogs’, asking: Who is engaged in using these tools and how are they used?

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE POWER TO KNOW

Universities are places where knowledge is created through research and scholarship, and also through the interaction that students have with subject content, with each other and with subject experts. Knowledge production is not simply the job of salaried scholars and researchers, although it is their role to lead and direct this activity. Students are active creators of knowledge when they interact with, and come to be expert in, a discipline area. Proponents of the social construction of knowledge argue that knowledge production is a group process:

‘Together, members construct and negotiate a shared meaning, bringing the process of the group along collectively rather than individually. In the process, they become what the literary critic Stanley Fish [1980] calls a “community of interpretation” working towards a shared understanding of the matter under discussion.’ (Brown and Duguid, 2000, p 222)

Theorists such as Brown et al (1989) who argue that it is from our own embodied experience that we use ‘situated reasoning’ to make meaning for ourselves and for others echo feminist writing about knowledge creation (Haraway, 1997, Harding, 1991). Haraway (1997) argues that historically not only bodily attributes of gender, but of race, class and language has defined who can validly ‘know’ about the world. She studied early modern scientific practices and noted that the authority to be a ‘witness’ of a scientific process, to record it and discuss it in professional circles was restricted to a peer group of upper class men. Feminist theory of the body – as a material object (Haraway’s cyborg, 1985), as a social actor (Harding’s situated knower, 1991), as a set of discursive practices (Butler’s performative actor, 1999) and as a material system (Barad, 2003) has always seen embodiment as centrally involved in the production of gendered knowledge. Bodies produce knowledge and the meaning we make is

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