

Chapter 22

Deconstructing the Politics of Identity and Representation in Cyberspace: Implications for Online Education

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ABSTRACT

The term cyberspace has come to represent the virtual space in which people surf the Web, send and receive email, chat with strangers, or instant message their friends. As people's lives become increasingly entangled with these technologies, understanding how gender, sexual, and racial identities are negotiated in online spaces becomes important to understanding the Internet as a social and political space. To uncover how individuals make sense of race, class, sexual, and gender identities in cyberspace, this chapter explores how they construct and reproduce cyberspace as a social and political realm. Specifically, drawing on Habermas' theory of ideal speech situation (1988) and Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia (1973, 1984), the analysis deconstructs how race, class, and gender are performed in cyberspace and how corresponding inequalities are created and upheld in this space. It also explores the ways in which online education might help individuals to actively disrupt social, racial, and gender inequalities in both their online and offline communities.

INTRODUCTION

Once believed to be the great equalizer—a space in which racial, gender, and other social inequalities would be replaced by a discourse of democracy and freedom for all (Rheingold, 1993)—the Internet has instead become both a novel medium and a new site through which various social inequalities

are produced, reproduced, and upheld. Hence, understanding the ways in which racial, ethnic, gender, age, and sexual identities are taken up on line is central to understanding how individuals make sense of self and community.

First, no object, event, or social identity exists prior to social interaction; rather, meaning is created and reproduced through interaction and interpretation. Thus, the meanings of social identities, such as “Black,” “White,” “boy,” “girl,”

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are all created interactionally and under constant negotiation. For instance, West and Zimmerman (1987), in their pivotal article “Doing Gender,” argued that rather than being assigned or achieved, gender is constantly performed, interpreted, and accomplished. Thus, they suggested, “doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine natures” (p. 126).

Extending this theoretical argument, racial, age, class, and sexual identities can be seen as similarly accomplished. Given the inherently constructed nature of computer mediated communication, such online identities can probably be best understood within a framework of performativity theory because “as [users] participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” (Turkle, 1995, p. 12). Therefore, the ways in which individuals actively “do” gender, race, and class within these virtual spaces both challenge and reinforce sociological notions of these identities.

This chapter therefore analyzes individual construction and reproduction of cyberspace as a social and political realm in order to identify how people make sense of race, class, sexual, and gender identities. Understanding this latter is central to understanding how individuals make sense of self and community while spending increasing amounts of time in virtual worlds. As a conceptual framework in which to analyze the performance of these identities in cyberspace and deconstruct the creation and performance of their corresponding inequalities, it draws on Jurgen Habermas’ (1988) theory of the ideal speech situation and Michael Bakhtin’s (1973, 1984) notion of heteroglossia. Finally, it explores the emancipatory potential of online education and how such education might help individuals to actively disrupt social, racial, and gender inequalities in both their online and offline communities.

BACKGROUND

Theories of Identity Construction in Cyberspace

Two contrasting epistemological approaches dominate the discourses and literature on performance and construction of identities in cyberspace: *post-modernism* and *social constructivism*. Within the first, postmodern theorists like Haraway (1994), Turkle (1995), and Danet (1998) have argued that although the geographies of modernity force individuals to locate their selves into a single embodied self, postmodern (feminine) geographies of cyberspace provide many opportunities for individuals to play many roles and perform multiple and flexible identities. In fact, these authors have claimed that the only constraint on interpersonal communication in cyberspace is the limits of the participants’ imagination and creativity. For instance, in her book, *Life on the Screen*, Turkle (1995) explored “the culture of simulation [that] may help us achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves” (p. 268). Specifically, she claimed that in cyberspace individuals are increasingly called upon to play many roles and that assuming different online identities can teach us how to be flexible, creative, democratic individuals who are more tolerant of diversity and more capable of personal growth.

Likewise, Danet (1998) analyzed the potential for gender play in cyberspace to disrupt the traditional gender stereotypes. That is, through online cross-dressing, textual cover-up (text as mask), and the choice of gender-neutral characters while gaming, cyberspace can be a site on which the male and female dichotomy become much more intricate. Nonetheless, while acknowledging other research on the reproduction of gender inequalities in cyberspace, Danet argued that the computer mediated communication in cyberspace is potentially liberating: “In text-based,

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