Josie Arnold - Globalized e-Curriculum Making and/as Cyberfeminist Poetics

Abstract
Is the global inherently flawed by its Western patriarchal source? In what ways can cybercolonisation act against gender blindness? This paper looks at the ways in which cyberfeminist ideas of textuality and discourse might fruitfully be conceptualised and explored to open up the influence of feminist poetics upon e-curriculum-making and hence the student experience of online multi-media. Clearly, the ways in which we view cultural representation influence the spaces provided in the cyber. Thus, an important aspect of e-education is a consideration of the possibilities for cyber-colonisation as being disruptive to dominant cultural real-space ‘norms’. This paper explores how the cyber enables and is enabled by laterality of discourse. It proposes that the experience of writing online curriculum multi-media materials is a contemporary challenge to educators. In doing so it both proposes and explicates ‘subjective academic narrative’ as a feminist research methodology. It is based upon my experiences and insights as a teacher, academic and widely-published writer in a number of genres, including interactive multi-media and curriculum.

Introduction: Gender and cyberspace
There are considerable differences in gender approaches to, familiarity with, and understanding of, the computer and ‘there exist evidences indicating that women typically display higher levels of computer anxiety’ ad ‘male college students evaluated computers as more useful than female students (sic) (Ong &Lai. 2006:820-2). The most common and most quickly growing use of the internet is placing the personal online through blogs that are electronic global spaces for citizen journalism, personal diaries and even sites against gender or other repression. Although this is increasing rapidly (Harp & Tremayne pp. 2006:247), a disproportionate number of men actually utilise blogging, and when they do, their blogs are, unlike women’s, ‘top-rated’. Indeed, Dustin Harp and Mark Tremayne’s study found that ‘…among the top thirty political bloggers only three with a woman as the primary author.’ (pp258)

Harp and Tremayne ask ‘Why?’ One answer they advance is that ‘...a male-dominated history of online participation points to the significance of social and cultural factors that have shaped the adoption and use of this technology, including the gendered structure of the Internet.’ (pp. 249) Furthermore, they connect this with the gendered nature of public as male and private as female. This is largely what instigated second wave feminism far back in the 1960’s as an escape from the woman’s room! Thus, ‘...offline gender dynamics are reproduced online’ (pp. 250) The networks that bloggers create between one another are called small worlds, and because most serious bloggers are seen as male, they are quite often very gendered in the fashion of the real-world patriarchy: ‘...most of the links are primarily run by men’. (pp.250)

The digital divide is, of course, not only gendered, having ‘...positioned black people in general, and black women in particular, as casualties of the information revolution...’ (Everitt 2004:pp.1282) It is, however, an electronic space about which Anna Everitt sees ‘...cyberfeminism’s potential as a promising new wave of feminist theory that can contest technologically complex territories and chart new ground for women.’ (2004:pp.1281)

This paper suggests that a contribution to that new ground is an understanding of the laterality of feminist poetics in writing in multimedia for the development and presentation of e-curriculum. (Arnold 1999; 2001;2002)
Teaching and writing curriculum and being published in many other genres has been my life-work. Writing for interactive multi-media and considering the colonisation of cyberspace from real-space since 1995, has led me to think about and practice feminist poetics in e-curriculum making. This is an important consideration for all of us who are interested in e-learning because it raises the interest from the possibilities offered by the technological to the possibilities inherent in the creative, joining the two in an illuminating and dynamic enterprise that enhances the student learning potentials offered our 21st century cybernative students. In doing so, it encourages meta-interpretation wherein ‘...the part played by the reader…to form a coherent whole is dominant and the reader is doing the work’. (Gardner 2004:36)

Feminist poetics opens a space for feminists not only to be involved in the colonisation of cyberspace but also to establish that multiple possibilities of textuality and discourse are valued in its construction, rather than old hierarchies being re-enacted and stable referents being held stagnant. (Gardner 2003:35-6). We may clearly see this in non-linear online fictional narratives. In discussing the instability of hypertext fiction, Colin Gardner says that: ‘hypertext fiction and Web-based fiction, being works of “variable expression”, have the ability to “make strange” one of the central assumptions informing our understanding of the traditional literary object-a fixed text.’ (2003:35). Many feminists assert that the non-linearity of cyberspace is suited to feminist poetics. (Hawthorne, S. &. Klein, R. 1999.) Poetics are involved in producing discourse which understands the intricacies of the holistic nature of our species and accepts a full range of human activities as valuable. In doing this, the binary opposites which provide power for the ‘right’ way of enacting our culture give way to multiple possibilities, all acceptable.

Poetics, then, have a much more free and roving view of what a text is like, how it can be read, and the kind of information it conveys as important. There is no model way of performing poetics: each experience consists of a reader coming to terms with her or his own self through a navigation of the writers' thoughts, ideas, feelings, wordskills and knowledge. There is no final authoritative conclusion in such works: they are offered for co-navigation, for readerly-writing. They contrast to AUTHORity in prose books and of templates in electronic texts.

‘Subjective academic narrative’ as a feminist research methodology.
This paper both proposes and enacts an academic methodology that draws together the public and private, the personal and the analytical in self. It is written as a narrative of self that both confronts the ubiquity of the Cartesian binary in education and displays an alternative way. There are many ways of conducting research which fit into the prescribed models that are acceptable to the western knowledge culture. A number of these are articulated quite specifically in University course regulations. Others underpin implicitly or are explicitly stated in many reports and projects and in the ways books organise themselves. They are almost always patriarchal and phallogocentric as discourse models. They are almost always shown as ‘normal or natural’. There are alternatives ways of knowing that draw together practice and theory. These may illuminate student curriculum as well as academics’ own research practices: such alternatives are particularly suited to feminist poetics in e-curriculum development.

For some time I have been working towards the articulation of a practice of academic writing that I am calling ‘the subjective academic narrative’. The process underlying such an apparent paradox is one that encourages questing and questioning of knowledge paradigms as well as within such paradigms. As such it has strong elements of research opening up new discourse models of narrative non-fiction in academic debate, as well as new content (Arnold 2005; 2007).
In my 45 plus years of teaching and in thinking and writing many published books, articles and lectures over many genres of discourse, I have come to understand textuality and discourse as always personal, and to see everything as a text under construction and available for multiple readings (Arnold 2007). This has led me to challenge outmoded academic claims for depersonalisation and an anterior position and to develop a methodology of ‘the subjective academic narrative’ as a feminist research methodology. The ‘subjective’ refers to acknowledgement of the inevitability of the personal being an integral part of research; the ‘academic’ refers to the analytical and the intellectual ambience in which university research takes place; and the ‘narrative’ refers to the story that is the way in which we re-tell all of our research. My work on this ‘subjective academic narrative’ form of discourse arose initially from my own interest in feminist-postmodernist textuality and discourse in my own PhD Thesis (Arnold 1994) and the work that entailed of entering into the academic debate through reading germinal academic works and commentaries (Barthes, Derrida, Cixous, Irigary, Eagleton, Norris, Milner). Today, it underpins my postgraduate teaching and PhD supervision in the area of practice led research. (Arnold 2005)

This approach was further developed by my interest in the work of Gregory Ulmer, particularly his early work on the ‘mystery’. Ulmer (1989) identifies a ‘mystorical’ approach to thinking and research. A ‘mystery’ puts under erasure all claims to fact/authenticity in writing. It shows all writing to be both personal and mysterious (my story and mystery) whatever its claims to authenticity and depersonalisation. It reveals the academic text to be sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical. It questions the dominant analytico-referential model of knowledge. At the same time it accords with much late 20th and early 21st century thinking about the self, the culture and even the world as a text to be constructed and read.

Moreover, Ferenc Feher quite usefully sees the battle that women have undertaken to confront masculinist ways of knowing and their powerful impact upon our cultural realities as: ‘...the single long duree revolution of our age which has proved not only increasingly successful, even irresistible, but which also brings many gains and very few losses. Its participants cannot help but have a very strong awareness of where they are coming from and what direction they are heading.’(Feher,1990:174)

I have found many aspects of postmodernist textuality and discourse useful (Barthes 1977;Derrida 1978; 1983; 1980; 1982; 1978a). For example, Gregory Ulmer’s mystorical approach opens up the text to many possible readings: there is no ‘one way’. Thus even the act of writing, much less the lived experience of being, displays itself as non-authoritative in the conventional sense. The implications of this are manifold. For me, perhaps the most important-and the most galvanising-is that the academic life and academic writing and language are now able to be seen as open, explorative and aware of their own evanescent nature in the same way as any other form of written or lived discourse. That is, academic writing can be understood as related to and made up of multiple ways of respecting various personal experiences.

John Caputo speaks of postmodernist moment as engaging in a ‘post-paradigmatic diaspora’. This dispersal of certainties ‘...does not wipe out the real world, steal it right from under our nose, threaten us with the prospect that when we awake in the morning we will find it gone, or lock us in a prison house of signifiers. It simply attaches a coefficient of contingency to existential claims that ought to inspire a certain amount of referential humility’ (Caputo 2000:253)

So the term ‘postmodernist-feminist’ would describe my own theoretical positioning.
Addressing and redressing the Cartesian Binary.
I argue that this model is suited to feminist cyberpoetics as it carves away the dominant Cartesian binary to display other fruitful ways of knowing. These can then flourish without being overshadowed by the ‘knowledge tree’ foliage. This may also be seen as rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari. 1981) This is important in education as the gendered bases of the patriarchy are so deeply entrenched in the Cartesian ‘norms’ underpinning it. This may also be seen as rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari. 1981)

Mary Midgely alerts scholars to the seductive simplicity of enlightenment concepts. (2004:5), arguing that cultural ‘norms’ celebrate the scientific knowledge model because it has led to so many demonstrable advantages. (Midgely 2004:9) Yet this celebration ignores what has been lost or has not occurred because of this dominance. Such cultural interstices are an important element enabling the growth of feminist poetics that act to draw together multiple ways of thought, enquiry, research, theory and practice. The academy, ways of knowing, pedagogy, theory and practice are entwined. Jane gallop is a proponent of enacting an academic feminism that breaks down the barrier between the professional and the personal through what she calls ‘anecdotal theory’. (Gallop 2002:7) Such thinking accords with the postmodernist dispersal of paradigmatic thought which urges the academy to accept alternative ways of knowing. It also coincides with Jacques Derrida’s (1983) ideas of not doing again what has already been done and accords with what I call ‘fictional truth’. (Arnold 2007)

Feminist Poetics and/in cyberspace.
Feminist poetics are involved in producing discourse which understands the intricacies of the holistic nature of our species and accepts a full range of human activities as valuable. In doing this, the binary opposites which provide power for the ‘right’ way of enacting our culture give way to multiple possibilities, all acceptable.

Such feminist poetics, then, have a much more free and roving view of what a text is like, how it can be read, and the kind of information it conveys as important. There is no model way of performing poetics: each experience consists of a reader coming to terms with her or his own self through a navigation of the writers’ thoughts, ideas, feelings, wordskills and knowledge. There is no final authoritative conclusion in such works: they are offered for co-navigation, for readerly-writing. They contrast to AUTHORity in prose books and templates in electronic texts. Feminist poetics open a space for feminists not only to be involved in the colonisation of cyberspace but also to establish that multiple possibilities of textuality and discourse are valued in its construction rather than old hierarchies being re-enacted.

Cyberspace is the electronic equivalent of the universe. William Gibson describes cyber as ‘consensual hallucination’. It can only be reached through computers. Colonising cyberspace is the challenge that we are facing at the beginning of the 21st century. How we do this so as to include women and women’s business is the crucial question. Jane Speedy (2005:285) speaks of l’ecriture feminine group as suggesting that ‘…poetic language is regarded as an act of resistance to established assumptions and “social constraints”…poetic language speaks to that which is not fixed or known and that ‘moves or escapes’ and appears to defy the confines of conventional language.’

The feminisation of language demands that phallogocentric discourse be re-shaped. Helen Cixous states that: ‘After our oppressive and inflexible era, I would like to live in a time in which language would not be bound, castrated, intimidated, obliged to obey the false scholars who are true ignoramuses. But sometimes I am stopped by the word-police. Interrogated and counter-interrogated. Sometimes I am the one who stops…’ Cixous 1988:50.)
Poetics being writing in a way which is more closely aligned to the storytelling aspects of poetry than to the sortive and functional elements of prose. For Cixous, the feminist poetic is ‘...the style of live water, where thirst quenches, since to be thirsty is already to give oneself drink. This style of water gives rise to works which are like streams of blood or water, which are full of tears, full of drops of blood or tears transformed into stars.’ (Cixous, 1988:25) For Cixous, moving outside the boundaries of the known is itself only able to be achieved through poetics.

Yet the mindshift that’s involved in participating in the creation of cybertexts is huge. We are being asked to change a cultural mindset that has been developed and made central to our understandings of communication, knowledge, learning and information over the entire history of Western civilisation. In this alone it has strong parallels to feminist practices of reading and writing. Gardner says that: ‘cognitive interface design is both implicitly and explicitly directed toward discerning and disseminating techniques and principles of effective navigation and presentation.’ (2004:37)

The technology for entering cyberspace came from the military. Even the ways in which programs are set up, their interactions, the language we use to talk about them, are part of the most masculinist aspects of the establishment. So there is still a desire to make the technology available to initiates: to have ways of using the flexibility offered by cybertextuality and harness it for training, replication, and a kind of ‘yes/no’, ‘right/wrong’ educational experience. Yet e-curriculum is not an endless labyrinth in which the student is lost amidst a series of mouse moves, interfaces, links and multimedia events.

There is resistance to this, of course. Much of it is to be found in the many feminist theories and practices that are lumped together under the catch-all of ‘feminism’. ‘Women’s relation to knowledge, to education, and to professional life has been manifested within the bounds of a regulating discursive system that insists on defining her as inverse, the opposite of man. What is more, women’s attempts to disprove the evidence against them, to assert legitimate claims to knowledge, are caught up in the same terms of discourse, the same conditions of truth. Women have entered the battle on the grounds laid out by male science and remain “the other of reason”. (Martusewicz, 1992:152).

It is my proposal that a feminist colonisation of cyberspace, a feminist writing of cybertexts, would confound that movement to provide programmed paradigms for electronic experiences. These oppositions to given research paradigms might best be found in the practice of feminist poetics. All feminisms ask of the culture how gender is politicised within it. For example, Luce Irigaray, who is concerned about the writing of feminist texts asks:

‘...how can women analyze their own exploitations, inscribe their own demands, within an order prescribed by the masculine? Is women’s politics possible within that order? What transformation of the political process does it require? (Irigaray, 1989:81)

Women, having been marginalised from the accepted practices of the dominant white, middle-class, masculinist hegemony, have also been ascribed certain ‘abilities’ by that group which are undervalued by that hegemony and hence suppressed by/in them. In textuality and discourse, these attributes might be described as ‘poetics’. They are involved with understanding the intricacies of the wholistic nature of our species and of accepting a full range of human activities as valuable. In doing this, the binary opposites which provide power for the ‘right’ way of enacting our culture give way to multiple possibilities, all acceptable. Thus, for example, ‘emotions’ are no longer seen as a lesser human experience than ‘reason’, and therefore pitted against one another.
Poetics, rather than the ‘...truth-constituting, legitimising and deeply hidden validifying function of the genre, prose.’ (Richardson, 1993:103) are sympathetic to the laterality available electronically in multimedia productions of discourse.

In the introduction to her book ‘On the matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations.’, Sadie Plant (1996) says that in cyberspace ‘...notions of authenticity, of essential femininity and of the self are displaced in favour of multiple roles, alternative personae and a matrix of potentialities which allows people to recode themselves...’

**Cybertexts**

Gardner (2004:54) states that ‘the provision of “design criteria for shaping the stories” is a contentious issue that brings to the forefront issues of technical literacy and reintroduces debates over authorial and artistic integrity’. The new writing spaces offered by cyberculture are fully explored through interactive multimedia consisting of written and spoken words, of sounds, of still and active images, and of interactivity, three-dimensionality, virtuality, global immediacy and animation. Aspects of these have been prefigured by the bringing to life a book through lifting it off the shelf and reading it, by the choice of television viewing, or by playing games. Interactive multimedia draws together many skills which we already have and in doing so it is clearly more than the sum of its parts. As a writer I actually felt my brain shift into another space when I had to think about writing for interactive multimedia. Clearly writing prose, poetry, drama, film and a PHD thesis had given me a lot of skills, but they were not enough to take me readily into interactive multimedia. What I have learnt from writing for a games-based multimedia interactive curriculum CDROM (G21: Global Cultural Dreaming, 1996-2008) is that the experience is closer to film, drama and poetry than it is to prose writing.

By its nature, the book is part of the authoritative paradigm of the dominant masculinist Western culture. It has an author or authors. Prose itself is sortive: it seeks to be directive, critical, maybe even didactic. You are trying to convey something to your audience out there. You are the performer; you are in control. You have the knowledge and by placing it in print others will be drawn to your insights and/or standards. You are confronting the blank page and when you have finished your MASTERpiece will be revealed as a way of leading others to greater heights. Planning how to write for cybertexts is closer to scripting than anything else.

By utilising poetics, particularly elements of scripting, cybertexts can transcend genre. They can move outside the expected and draw together elements of entertainment as well as information and knowledge-production; elements of poetics as well as prose; elements of group production rather than solitary authorship; and elements of fun and emotion as well as analysis and criticism. They are a perfect vehicle for breaking down the old dominance of genre as either ‘fact’ (good, useful, researched, reliable, checkable) and fiction (emotional, unstable, unreliable, unresearched, non-replicable).

‘Genres evolve through human purposes, reflecting and reproducing (through the various systems in which they are implicated) what is culturally relevant and significant for the human community.’ (Swingewood, 1986:104)

The power of print has reinforced the dominance of the patriarchal society. Feminist writings and poetic act against this dominance. Patriarchy may be viewed as Irigary defines it:

‘...the appropriation of nature by man, the transformation of nature according to ‘human’ criteria, defined by men alone; the submission of nature to labour and technology; the reduction of its material, corporeal, perceptible qualities to man’s practical concrete activity; the equality of women amongst themselves, but in terms of equivalence that remain external
to them; the constitution of women as ‘objects’ that emblemize the materialization of relations among men, and so on. (Irigaray, 1989:184-5)

Ong and Lai state that ‘our findings show that men’s ratings of perceptions with respect to computer self-efficacy, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and behavioural intention to use e-learning were all higher than women’s.’ (2006:832)

Concluding remarks.
It is not only feminists who see the powerful sortive and taxonomic influence of printed texts. The contemporary French Philosopher, Jacques Lyotard (certainly no feminist), also sees the need for a new approach to textuality and discourse to free it from old constraints: ‘The complicity between political phallacrocy and philosophical metalanguage is made here: the activity men reserve for themselves arbitrarily as fact is posited legally as the right to decide meaning. The social groups of distributors, that is, citizens, becomes confused with the principal that there is something like distributive reason, matter upon which reason is inscribed or written, and that there is a distinction between matter and reason.’ (Lyotard, 1989:119)

In many ways, feminist poetics fits into postmodernist or postructuralist views of the immediacy and individuality of each piece of information, story, or happening. It acts against the established episteme or scientific methodology and its influences upon how stories about people are recorded.

The non-linear possibilities of computer textuality and discourse provide an opportunity for lateral and singular and hence non-masculinist models of knowledge. ‘...the main battle is to destroy the hegemonic phallocentric system. The demand should not be for exclusively female society, but for a society where men and women share the same anti-logocentric, anti-hierarchical values (Przbylowicz, 1987: 155)

Print, mainly in the highly structured form of prose, has dominated the ways in which the masculinist culture in which we live has formed and sustained itself. (Hawksworth 1988) Utilising feminist poetics will bring cyberfeminism into cyberspace.

Indeed, the feminist educationalist Jane Flax says of feminist textuality and discourse that it acts to: ‘...tolerate, invite and interpret ambivalence, ambiguity and multiplicity, as well as to expose the roots of our need for imposing order and structure no matter how arbitrary and oppressive these may be. If we all do our work well, ‘reality’ will appear even more unstable, complex, and disorderly than it does now.’ (Flax 1990:183.)

This colonising society, which we, with no indication of a sense of irony, call 'the first world', has a very specific view of cyberspace: it is a place in which we will practice and expand Western capitalist cultural imperatives.

Our earthspace experience of Western colonisation tells us that we will take our prejudices and beliefs with us into cybercolonisation. So we may safely assume that human strengths and weaknesses pertinent to western post-industrialist societies are implicated in the construction of the emergent electronic culture. This might seem to be a self-evident point, yet it is ignored in the superhypeway talk about the inevitability of the 'advances' offered by a global cybertecture. In this paper I have opened up the possibilities of utilising some aspects of the many feminist positions and ideas to investigate the potentials offered by feminist research models of laterality and singularity both in themselves and as contributing factors in developing interactive multimedia curriculum materials.
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