QUILTING THE NET: an experiment with online learning [i]

Nandita Gandhi

INTRODUCTION

The future seems to have arrived. The information and communications technological revolution has in a relatively short period of time introduced new methodologies and activities into our lives bringing about changes in our way of thinking, living, employment and social institutions. Feminist scholarship, concerned about its impact on women, has put forward different studies and conclusions. Once again there is the concern that the new changes may bypass women. The arguments and analysis are very similar to those made in studying the exclusion of women from the field of science and technology. We know that society's starting premise is that women are essentially unscientific i.e. not rational but more emotional and perpetuates this belief by systematically excluding them from the knowledge and use of tools and skills. The exclusion begins in the household, continues through school and is reinforced by other institutions. The majority of women are thus not part of the culture of technology. The sexual division of labour in households further restricts them from 'leisure' time hobbies and surfing the Internet. Raised and socialised into being anti technology, the question - how can women overcome their resistant to new technologies? is a crucial one. The other crucial issue is how can we take those women who have already taken the first steps to another level of involvement in technology? We put forward the proposition that we need to recognise the agency of women users of the Internet. Our strategy to strengthen women must include engaging with them in their areas of interest and with contents that make a difference in their lives and struggles and at the same time encourage the learning of the medium.

USERS

There is no way to calculate the number of Internet users as people access it at home, through cyber cafes and at work. The rough estimate is that twice as many men than women get onto the Internet. In the US, about 38 percent of women use the Net and the rate falls in many developing countries. Less than one percent of the population - male or female - has Internet access out of which women form 22 percent of all Internet users in Asia, 38 percent of those in Latin America, and six percent of Middle Eastern users (Hafkins, 2001). The majority of these users do so as part of their work or tools of production like for data entry, manufacture and for programming. Others use it as a tool of communications. Very few are producers like net content providers, designers, inventors and engineers. Undoubtedly there is a need to encourage more women into the field through education and training. This will mean their individual advancement, increase in knowledge and employment potential. It will increase the

mass of women using this technology. It is not necessary to repeat that these women are from the elite or middle class and urban backgrounds. A very small beginning has been made in taking this technology to urban slums and rural communities. The Mahila Samakya in Rajasthan gave a demonstration of this to former US President Clinton. New implements and technological advancements at first seem elitist. Compared to a stick, the plough must have seemed sophisticated, two and four wheelers are still considered male areas though more women drive cars and some buses and taxis. The computer's mouse need not be a male one if enough women accept it and use it.

We have taken up the task of upgrading the skills of existing users by involving them in their areas of interest in the context of the women's movement. Our target group were young women who were part of non governmental organisations with a minimum knowledge of e mail and the Word program. As we know from our own experience of working in NGOs, there is a dearth of time for upgrading one's skills and knowledge. Yet our work demands that we expand our scope of information and skills. Online learning seemed the best answer to the limitations and scope of the situation. It would simultaneously address the issue of skills and information.

ONLINE LEARNING

Very simply, the Internet is an international network of computers linked together to exchange information. The core of this network consists of permanently joined computers with high speed connectivity. Once you connect to a service provider, your computer 'talks' to another anywhere in the world. The Internet grew out of a US Defence Department project in the 1960s designed to link its military bases, research departments and manufacturers. As computer manufacturers and software companies realised its potential, more services were provided and more people began using it. No one really owns the Internet as anyone can place whatever material its wants on it. Its uses keep expanding from electronic mail, shopping, business, bank support, and games to music. New developments keep taking place making the Internet indefinable and a complex phenomenon. In the final analysis, it is less about computers and more abut people overcoming physical barriers in order to communicate and share information.

It did not take long for education to join the list of possibilities. Education connected itself to computers in three ways:
- o   To learn about the computer itself
- o   To learn using the computer and Net
- o   To use the computer and the Net as an instrument of education

Online learning is gradually replacing video training, complementing classroom teaching and CD Roms and manuals. It is part of the information technology industry with training institutes and companies offering programmes or learning management systems and numerous courses for corporate staff training and for higher level academic teaching. The proliferation of online learning courses has produced a body of literature on its theory and implementation.

Shepherd (2002) puts forward three models, which are commonly used for e learning.

- o The self study model comes from books as manuals and CD Roms and relies heavily on written material. It does not presuppose an interaction with the tutor or other learners. The learner is expected to advance according to the text and his/her own pace. The self study model makes manuals and learning more accessible to others when it is placed on the Internet.
- o The classroom model takes the classroom onto the Net and the tutor uses Chat, notice boards and quizzes to teach and assess the learner. The virtual classroom saves the learner travel time and cost.
- o Lastly the distance learning model relies on a scheduled learning process with minimum interaction with the trainer. The Net is seen as an instrument or new channel for distance learning.

Each of these models have their pros and cons and usually learning courses do a mix and match according to their learner profiles. Honey and Mumford have classified different sets of learners according to their learning characteristics. Though it is impossible to bring one homogenous set of learners together when offering a course, it helps understand various styles of learning and matching course material to a generalised profile.

- o The activists have an open mind and like to 'do' things, experiment, and try new things. They will give anything at least one try.
- o Reflectors like to 'look before leaping' and are not so open to experimentation. They like to gather data and are slow in making up their minds.
- o The theorists use logic and rationality, are used to organised academic way of thinking and arguing.
- o Pragmatics are hands on people who like applying what they have learnt. Pure theory is not their cup of tea.

THE STREENET EXPERIMENT

Given the rush and worry of our daily lives, we had longed for online courses, which we could access. When a feminist teaching institution in Sweden asked Akshara[ii] to collaborate with it on designing and executing a course for activists of the North and South, we readily agreed. However a dearth of funds prevented that project but saw through the India part of it. We were to get technical support from our Swedish partners and access to their software. Though the Net made that possible, it could not do away with the language barrier. So except for some funds we were on our own.

We had spoken about this experiment to some documentation centers of which Sakhi from Trivandrum, Jagori from Delhi and Alochana from Pune joined in as partners. We set our objectives as:

- To give our e-learners a comprehensive course combining theory, practice and skills. To engage the students in a dialogue/discussion on the emergence of the women's movement, theoretical perspectives on feminism and other issues confronting the women's movement
- To introduce our e-learners to the fascinating world of the Internet and e-learning by surfing, using different web-sites, search engines and become proficient in the use of the Net
- Through the Net, promote collaborations / networking amongst activists on issues related to the women's movement.

Each city was asked to select learners after circulating a brochure announcing the course and its modules. The criteria were very simple and basically needed basic knowledge of the Net and the Word program. They also had to be working in an organisation for a year[iii]. Each city had its applicants come to an initial meeting at which the course and its requirements were explained. It gave the learners time and information to make up their minds to join. This was the easiest part. We had to make sure that our three objectives would be realised in the three parts, namely the selection of the software, its implementation and the learning modules. We tapped a number of experts for advice on software, course design and format[iv] but did not realise the close co-operation between technology, academics and training methodology.

We choose an indigenous[v] Learning Management System, which gave the possibility of implementing the 'classroom model' with an interactive format for our learners, who we categorised as 'activists' learners. Interactive formats are difficult to design as they require graphic inputs, games designers and language editors. Unfortunately, each is a specific area and requires bringing specific technicians or people together in a team. The software company also provided the technical support for integrating the learning module into the system. As our software partners were unused to our course material, they could not directly design and execute it. It turned out to be a huge learning experience for us. We had to involve ourselves at every stage including selecting visuals. It was an effort to bring together knowledge of technology and clarity on course material. The learning system problems continued in the form of bugs, small failures, forgotten commands all through the course. On our side, one person who was not Internet savvy and had no training, educated herself to handle the functionalities took over the role of the central systems administrator, which involved co-ordinating with the learners and liaison with the software persons [vi].

All four of us from documentation centres were used to the academic format and classroom teaching. But that method would not be exploiting the potential of the Internet and online learning. The modules needed to be structured in a way that gave the gist of the training material and at the same time provoked the learner to do offline reading to complement it. Our three [vii] modules consisted of Understanding Feminism, The Indian Women's Movement and Globalisation and Women. The online course was not open but time bound and for a period of six months. We interspersed assignments and self assessments between module sections. This gave learners the motivation to read the resource kit of articles and books from the recommended reading list. Deadlines are a two edged tool. They motivate learners to keep on track

but most of them appeal for extensions or even drop out, as they have not finished assignments. In order to achieve our last objective we introduced monthly meetings in each city amongst learners and a mid course meeting between different city learners. Meetings facilitated learners getting to know each other and helped sort out their questions and doubts, which were aired in the Discussion Forums and Chats.

LESSONS LEARNT

The online course is not over but we can point out some of the lessons we have learnt from it.

- o Academic institutions and documentation centers would like to have their own online course. It is a good objective, as we need as many as possible. However, we usually underestimate the technical and financial constraints. Manufactured or custom made software costs are high. We need high speed computers and cable connections.
- o Technical support is needed at our end in order to implement it. We do not need software engineers but interested people who will undertake training.
- o Course design also needs technical and graphic support. Interactive modules require images and games, which require time and money. We had to delay the launch of the course, as we had to continually check the modules.
- o The main 'selling' aspect of online courses is easy access, anyplace and anytime. Women activists like us had assumed that they could fit the online course into their busy schedules. But learning requires a place and time free of distractions. For women, neither the workplace nor the home provides such a place.
- o Initially a lot of time is needed in 'hand holding' as women are resistant and unused to the medium. A sympathetic co-ordinator with loads of time is essential.
- o The number of drop outs increased with each assignment and as the novelty of the course disappeared. Time was one factor. We believe that women need support from their organizations and co-workers to provide them on the job time to spend on the course. Most learning courses try to retain the interest by using varied means of presentation and through graphics.
- o Every course needs a few dedicated tutors or trainers. In our case, we expected activists of the documentation centers to participate as trainers given their normal load of work. Learners need more time and involvement from trainers to goad them to overcome their resistance to technology and keep them interested in the course.

CHRONOLOGY OF QUOTES

" I am very excited about the course, but am totally new to it and am wondering whether I am doing it right?"

" I am at a loss on how to get started. Help!"

" The idea of the assignment was good. I asked 5 women whether they would call themselves feminists and they gave me odd looks. Now I am wondering whether I should extend it to men as well".

" I am way behind in everything. Perhaps I should drop out. I just can't seem to find the time to log on, read or do assignments. Can I get a refund?"

" Like you, I could not find 'feminism' and 'feminist' in the Hindi dictionary. Can anyone help?"

"Hey, only a few people keep talking on the Discussion Forum, where are the others?"

" What's the point in having a Resource Kit in your office. The whole idea of the online course is not to travel."

"It is my son's second birthday, I would like him to be a feminist".
"Are you one yourself?"
" It will be okay if he is not anti feminist!"

" Sixteen of us from Kerala would like to come to the mid course meeting".

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