Resistance is Futile, Or is It?

Gender Lessons from a Micro Cybercommunity

by Robert A. Pritchard

L'auteure décrit quelques unes des embûches qui empêchent les jeunes filles de s'initier aux technologies modernes et la les moyens utilisés dans une école secondaire pour stimuler leur intérêt et développer leur expertise.

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> Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination.
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> —William Gibson, *Necromancer*

> In my mind, there is nothing "irreversible" about the development of cyberspace; rather than a consensual hallucination, it represents a contested and irrevocably political terrain....
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> —Robert Markley, "Boundaries: Mathematics, Alienation, and the Metaphysics of Cyberspace"

In this article I describe the emergence at Inglenook Community High School of a group of female hackers[1] who formed what I call a micro cybercommunity of resistance and used chat lines to disrupt the dominant androcentric hacker subculture that existed at the school. From this development, I draw three "gender" lessons that may have wider application. However, before I proceed it is necessary to contextualize the school and provide some background.

Inglenook is located in the inner city of Toronto in an old industrial area historically known as Corktown after the large number of poor Irish immigrants who settled there. Our 125 students are predominately white and middle class with parents in the arts, business, education, and the media. We also have a number of students of colour, students on social assistance, and street kids.

Typically, the school and our students are seen as "arty" and the majority of students are interested in visual arts, music, photography, fashion, and film. We have an art gallery, a darkroom, a video editing suite, and digital imaging capabilities in the school. Recently, we have attracted a greater number of students interested in math and science, especially computer science. According to *Toronto Life* magazine, Inglenook attracts students who are a "misfit elite." Inglenook's curriculum is at the academic level and 80–90 per cent of our students go on to university, the Ontario College of Art, or various community colleges. In 1995 Inglenook celebrated its twentieth anniversary which is a major accomplishment for an alternative high school.

The school is a democratically-run community with students on our board of directors, a committee called CEASA (Committee for the Evaluation of Academic Standards and Admissions) that interviews all perspective students and serves as a mediating body for an array of disputes and issues, and on a student council. We have regular all-school meetings for the sharing of information and for decision-making on a variety of issues that can be raised by any member of the community. We also have a program for half a day each week called Outreach that allows students to work as volunteers in the community in, for example, a local food bank, as a classroom assistant, on a community newspaper, in peer tutoring programs, and so on. Students can also pursue academic or personal interest courses in Japanese, music, dance, cooking, and pottery. Our parents are also very active in the school as volunteers, on fund raising committees, and on our board of directors. The atmosphere at Inglenook is informal, friendly—"funky" as one student described it—and highly academic.

Gender politics

Inglenook became seriously interested in computers about seven years ago. At that time the staff decided that rather than have a clustering of computers in a computer lab attached to a math or science room, we would adopt a distributed approach with computers in every classroom and even one in the student lounge. Part of our philosophy was that we did not want computers to be seen as tools solely for math or science but as useful "appliances" for all courses. We alternated buying Macs and PCs because we felt that students should be familiar with both platforms. Students would be able to use these computers at any time even during class time if the teacher did not object.

Gradually a small, aggressive, androcentric hacker subculture emerged. Male students flocked to the computers, initially to play games, and the female students stayed away in droves. Inglenook is a very profeminist school and the staff and some of the female students were dismayed that the use of computers was an exclusively male preserve. We tried a number of things to try to get the female students interested, including limiting the time that any one student could be on the computers, but there was little response. A real irony here is that our two math/science teachers are women who are highly computer literate in both major computer platforms and would presumably serve as good role models for the female students.

In 1993 I determined to get the school online as I had become aware of the fantastic resources available on the Internet. The Toronto Board took a fair bit of convincing because they

had just placed a moratorium on phone lines. Ironically, while much of the world was getting wired, our board held out for chalk and talk. Finally, we managed to secure one phone line dedicated to the Internet and, again to our dismay, the male students gravitated to it and started using it to search for information, especially anything related to hip-hop music, The *X-Files*, movies, alien abduction, games, sports, and just to "surf the Net." The one computer with an online connection was placed in my classroom because the staff believed that I had the most experience with the Internet and could "police" the use of it and also encourage and support the female students. There were also a number of male students who were not "into computers" who were intimidated by this hacker group.

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We set up a special committee of students in the school called the Cyberspace Group whose mandate it was to set out policy for fair computer use, to deal with online pornography and illegal hacking, and to encourage the female students to learn about computers and begin using them to word-process as well as use Internet resources as part of their research for class projects. I acted as staff liaison. We held a number of lunch time workshops and one female student who saw herself as a hacker, worked hard to interest the female students. Some female students did become interested but it was extremely difficult for them to get online because there was always a number of intimidating male students clustered around the computers in my room.

Generally, the male students did have more familiarity with the computers because they had spent time on them in elementary school or on home computers. Some were very highly skilled and had part-time jobs in programming and Web site development. One student who became locally famous left our school without graduating to take a job with a start up Internet Service Provider at $90,000 a year. The use of arcane computer discourse and endless acronyms by these male hackers and their general disdain for anyone who did not have their knowledge and skill level contributed to a sense of alienation and frustration on the part of the female students. These male hackers clearly saw themselves as an elite and had no desire to share their turf with anyone else.

A micro cybercommunity of resistance

In September 1995 I agreed to teach a Grade 10 introductory computer course, a course that had not been offered in the school for several semesters. In addition to teaching the basics, part of the hope was that this course would impart enough computer knowledge and skills so that those students—both male and female—who had previously felt intimidated by the hacker subculture would gain enough courage to challenge their monopoly on the computers. The course did achieve what we had hoped for but in a way that none of us would have predicted.

The galvanizing event that brought about significant change occurred in two stages. The first stage was my screening of the film *Hackers* which has a strong female character whose hacking ability was equal to that of the male characters in the film. The film also glamourized the use of hacking skills in the service of social justice issues. The female students in the course identified strongly with the female lead. Some of them said that they wanted to become hackers and excitedly discussed how they would use their newly-acquired hacking skills. One particular female student who was a very strong feminist, pointed out how the male dominance of computers in the course was a replay of what was happening at lunch time and after school. The female students grumbled about the male monopoly on computer use but could not see any way of changing this social reality.

The second stage was a heated discussion on chat lines that was provoked by an article I gave the class. The female students were very excited about them and wanted to try one out while generally the male students were less interested. I suggested that the students pursue the notion of chat lines and find out how to get on one. One of the female students took up the challenge and joined a chat line called Firefly. She learned how to access it, use the range of commands available, mastered the subculture of chat lines, and used it to communicate with a number of virtual friends.

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The other female students became interested and felt that what she was doing was "cool" (the highest term of praise in an adolescent's lexicon) and soon there was a small group of female students who were routinely using chat lines. The male hackers were not familiar with the chat lines and their monopoly on computer access was broken because when one

of the students unfamiliar with chat lines wanted to get online it was the female students who knew how to.

Within the class I noticed a real change in attitude on the part of the female students. They now exhibited a sense of empowerment and started to cluster around the computer as one of them would go online and chat with her new virtual friends. This attitude started to change the lunch time and after school use of the computers as the female students increasingly contested the male dominance of the computers.

Several significant events occurred after the female students became empowered. One was a group of female students openly challenging a large, particularly obnoxious student who was always "hogging" the computer to get information about raves. In their excitement to get online they "forgot" their proper, deferential female roles and basically chased him from the room. The second was a humorous exchange between one of the female students and her newly-acquired virtual husband with whom she had two virtual children. During class this student would give us a moment-by-moment account of her online chatting in a very forceful and humorous way. One day she was fed up with what she called her virtual husband's sexist behavior and she divorced him online while the rest of the female students cheered her on. The male students were perplexed by all this but it was clear to me that the young women had formed what I call a micro cybercommunity of resistance and the former male dominance of computer access and use was now effectively undermined.

The final event was the novel use of the chat lines to keep an absent student aware of what was happening in class discussion. Two female students who became very interested in chat lines—they described themselves as "addicted"—became close friends and would often go online together with a chat group. One day one of them was sick at home and her friend went on the chat line and gave her a real time description of the class discussion and read us the comments of the student who was at home. We all found this very exciting and a number of students wanted to try it out and become virtual students so they would not have to come to school all the time but could be "present" in class via the chat line.

Conclusion

While I do not think that I am entitled to generalize from the experience of a small number of students and teachers in one inner city school, I do believe that three provocative conclusions can be drawn from this series of events at Inglenook. The first is that forms of resistance can exist effectively on the micro level. What I am describing as a micro cybercommunity of resistance was comprised of a dozen or so young women who used the structure and possibilities of the Internet to rupture the dominant patriarchal practices of a group of young male students and raised the question of who has access to certain types of technology and how that technology will be used. The second is that forms of resistance exist within and alongside of hegemonic, normative gender roles. The young women, stereotypically interested in the social and disinterested in technology, found a way to use a specific technology to create a sense of community both in the fleshworld and in the virtual.

This micro cybercommunity of resistance I am describing here did not set out to and did not succeed in disrupting certain gender specific roles the young women have been assigned in this culture but they repositioned, as it were, those roles to challenge certain patriarchal practices and thereby empowered themselves. One of the female teachers watching the young female hackers on the chat lines commented that it looked like a "pajama party." The girls were giggling, teasing, chatting, joking, and having fun and using "male" technology to their own ends. They were also trying on social roles such as that of virtual girlfriend/wife in a simulated environment that provided them with safety and a degree of fantasy not usually present in the fleshworld.

The third lesson that can be learned, I would argue, is that cyberspace, like all social spaces, is a contested terrain that is vulnerable to specific, local, partial acts of resistance. It is these site-specific acts of resistance that prevent a totalizing, hegemonic set of patriarchal practices. As one young woman said at the end of the computer course, "The two most important things I learned in this course are that women can be hackers and that computers aren't just for men." The experience at Inglenook was obviously not a global revolution, but perhaps something more like a virus that might continue to spread and mutate into a reconfigured social formation that is based on equity and fair access to computer technology and emergent cyberspace.

An earlier version of this article was presented at the "Representation, Arts and Media in Education and Community" Conference at Carleton University and will also appear in the proceedings (Carleton University Press, forthcoming fall 1998).

Robert Pritchard has been a high school teacher for the Toronto Board of Education for 23 years. In 1996 he completed his doctorate at OISE/University of Toronto. He is currently writing a book tentatively titled Cyborgs and Cyberspace: Virtual Life in the 21st Century.

[1]A hacker is someone who is "technically sophisticated, dedicated to, and perhaps obsessive about computers" (Williams and Cummings 254). Hackers should be distinguished from crackers who use their computer skills to steal or destroy data or illegally enter computer systems.

References

Williams, Robin, and Steve Cummings. *Jargon: An Informal Dictionary of Computer Terms.* Berkeley: Peachpit Press, 1993.