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**Theoretical Considerations for Using the Internet with WE LEARN**

WE LEARN<sup>1</sup> uses a technology—the Internet—that has growing interest among literacy educators and some learners. However, there are two separate yet connected inherent problems with using the internet. The first relates to gender-based oppressions as they continue to be perpetuated through the organization and use of the internet and cyberculture. The second problem relates to the lack of access by women learners (and many literacy programs) to computers, technology, and ultimately, the World Wide Web.

Adults with low levels of literacy and those who lack English language proficiency are less likely to have access to the Internet and less likely to find information and resources relevant to their interests and needs on the Internet. 48.9 percent of college-educated individuals have Internet access as compared to 6.3 percent of individuals without a high school diploma. (U.S. Department of Commerce, *Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide*, 1999 as quoted in Reddy & Green, 2000)

*Gender Oppressions on the Internet*

In recent years there has been a growing amount of research exploring gender issues on the internet (Gurak, 2001; Hawthorne, 1999; Millar, 1998; Spender, 1995). Dale Spender (1995) recognizes general literacy as an integral issue. She explores what it means to be able to read print media and how use of the internet shapes us as readers. More importantly, Spender makes the connections between the ways women have been disadvantaged by print media and how this trend continues on the internet superhighway.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.litwomen.org/welearn.html>

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Women were excluded from the process of knowledge-making when the printing press was invented; and there's plenty of evidence today to suggest that women are again being kept out of the production of information as we move to the electronic networks. (p. 161)

Millar (1998) indicates the ways in which girls continue to be socialized away from computer-based activities and acknowledges that women and men "...must confront online misogyny and racism anywhere they find it...[and] challenge locations that perpetuate inequality and minority exploitation" (p. 172). Gurak (2001) reminds us that technologies are not neutral in value and that sexism exists in computer culture.

To address these concerns, there are a growing number of cyberfeminist and cyberfeminist websites.

CyberFeminist is a philosophy which acknowledges, firstly, that there are differences in power between women and men specifically in the digital discourse; and secondly, that CyberFeminists want to change that situation....

CyberFeminism is political, it is not an excuse for inaction in the real world, and it is inclusive and respectful of the many cultures which women inhabit.

(Hawthorne & Klein, 1999, p. 2)

The essays in Cyberfeminism (Hawthorne & Klein, 1999) outline some of the positions and activisms taken on by cyberfeminists, especially as they relate to connectivity, critique, and creativity. The editors caution that "connectivity can result in disconnection from the local and the real" (p. 7) as women lose personal connections and come to depend more and more on internet virtual worlds "...where you can no longer trust experience, since all is mediated by text or image" (p. 7). While cyberfeminists may use the internet for global political organizing, they

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continue to critique the medium as well, keeping in mind that the poor and marginalized continue to be so in cyberspace as well. Cyberspace is being used to promote prostitution and other abusive venues. Continuing the reach of global patriarchy, new technologies and cyberspace are also being colonized and "...can be used to trace the movements of new political forces, of subversion among the citizenry, and of any individual who has ever logged into the system" (p. 9). In spite of these concerns, cyberfeminists still explore new creativities in developing a cyberculture both appealing to and beneficial for social justice concerns of women.

In addition to Cyberfeminism, examples of the kinds of internet projects accomplished by women can also be found in Cherney & Weise, 1996. In their introduction, they recognize not only gender issues but also structural racism inherent on the Internet. "None of the few women of color we were able to find online were available to write, a mirror of the extremely white nature of the medium at this time" (p. xvii). Similar arguments in relation to whiteness have been made as well. While critical multiculturalism is being introduced in the traditional classroom environment, "virtual" whiteness shifts to the technological mediated education in cyberspace (Carter, 1998). While feminists address issues of race and class in connection to gender-oppression, some writers mention race and poverty but ignore gender oppression. For example, Reddy & Green (2000) state "...the major complicating factors of poverty and racism require particular attention, sensitivity, and appropriate action when dealing with adult students and their families."

All of the resources mentioned so far though—with perhaps the exception of Dale Spender (1995) to a lesser extent—assume women's literacy. These concerns for gender oppression and the ways in which women have limited power or impact in creating cyberculture are important. However, these discussions still lack awareness of women for whom print literacy creates

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barriers and who are therefore even more alienated from computer technologies, thus marginalizing them even further.

There have been a growing number of internet resource books for women which give advise on how to get on the internet. They list numbers of internet sites of interest to women and girls (Gilbert & Kile, 1996; Penn, 1997; Senjen & Guthrey, 1996; Sinclair, 1996).<sup>2</sup> All of these books claim some level of user-friendliness and they all also assume competent reading levels. In the resources section of websites, they list a limited number of educational websites (mostly for K-12). None of them list any sites relevant to women in adult literacy education. Generally, I think this signals a lack of awareness among women about literacy issues for women but also there exists (especially at the time these books were originally published) a dearth of websites addressing literacy issues for adult women.

*Lack of access to technology in literacy*

Cynthia Selfe (1999) cautions that the use of technologies reproduce already existing social elements including “a stable citizenry that continues to be sorted hierarchically into social subgroups based systematically on links between race and class and the related effects of differential literacy levels, educational opportunities, health environments, and access to technology” (p. 9). Her book explores the ways in which the educational, government and business sectors have overlapping roles in expanding the national project of technological literacy (p.98). She devotes a chapter to exploring the ways in which these systems pressure the role of parents in this endeavor. Parents in this system supported one-dimensional views of literacy and reinforced its link through technology by purchasing home computers and software

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<sup>2</sup> I find it interesting to note that all of these titles were published within months of each other and all are different in their format and emphasis.

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and supported decisions for greater technological use in schools. Tragically, in what I assume is her effort to make all parents equally responsible, she ignores any mention of gender-based barriers. Women still tend to be predominately responsible for the care of children. What does it mean if they continue to be systematically steered away from power making decisions in the uses of technology? What are the ramifications for the large numbers of single-mothers who are often living in poverty and/or themselves struggling with literacy issues?<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of the book while exploring future responsibilities, Selfe again underscores the myth of literacy and acknowledges that

in our educational system, and in the culture that this system reflects, computers continue to be distributed differentially along the related axes of race and socioeconomic status, and this distribution contributes to ongoing patterns of racism and to the continuation of poverty. (1999, p. 135)

Her concerns and arguments would be stronger if she also indicated gender-based oppressions involved in the uses of literacy and technology as well.

In addition to the gender, race and class issues,<sup>4</sup> limited access to technologies exists in the adult literacy field in general. According to Wagner & Hopey (1998) "adult literacy programs...still lag far behind in using these [electronic] technologies for instruction....The level of interest in expanding the use of technology, however, appears to be growing rapidly, perhaps more so than anywhere else in the world" (p.1). A quick search through the ERIC database using

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<sup>3</sup> According to the organization Wider Opportunities for Women, as quoted by Laubach Literacy Action (1995):

- In the United States, an estimated 23% of all adult females have severely limited literacy skills, compared to 17% of males.
- For female heads of households, 75% of them with less than a high school diploma live in poverty, compared to 34% of men in the same situation.
- Young women with below-average skills and below-poverty incomes are five-and-one-half times more likely to become teen parents.
- Nearly 40% of female single parents and 35% of displaced homemakers have an eighth-grade education or less.

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keywords “internet” AND “adult literacy” yields 29 articles written since 1995 that explore ways in which adult literacy educators can use the internet. Some of these articles address ways in which the internet can be worked into the curriculum while others speak to the need for learners to become more technologically literate. Some include case studies of programs using technology while others simply provide resources for educators that can be found on the Internet (Green, 1997). Additionally, Thomas Eland (1995) compiled an internet directory which then appeared on its own website (<http://literacy.kent.edu/midwest/resc/litdir/index.html>) and has since been absorbed into the NIFL LINCSearch (see below). Some evidence for the interest in the use of the internet especially comes from the numbers of national (governmental and academic) agencies and specific interest groups that use the internet to provide access to documents and resources (see below). Though all of these sites do have some links specifically for women and literacy, three sites in particular have comprehensive sites for women (see below).

In many ways, the emphasis seems to be on why adult learners should be able to access computer technologies (Reddy & Green, 2000) and how to use the internet for instructional purposes (Epstein, 1996; Luke, 1997). In spite of the recognition that specific skills are needed and that critical literacy concerns need be emphasized, there is little to no research describing what formats or layouts themselves make websites accessible to adult learners. Cynthia Selfe (1992) points out there are new grammars and layouts associated with the use of computers.

We know that individuals read screen text more slowly, less accurately, and less effectively than text printed on a page. They have more difficulty getting

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<sup>4</sup> Disability, age and culture ....

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a sense of the text and find it harder to locate specific information on most computer screens than on a page. (pp. 19-20)

This has ramifications for literacy expectations and usage. Some educators explore the connections between education and new technologies, specifically the internet and ways in which it can be used to help adult learners. Selfe has noticed students adapting to this medium by using “formatting conventions that were screen-based” (p. 21) including chunking for more efficient page-up and page-down navigation, as well as use of color for visual cues and painting areas for “visual revelation of logical structures” (p. 22).

Along with Selfe's suggestions, the work of Virginia Westwood and Heather Kaufmann (1999) helped with some of the technological considerations for designing the WE LEARN website. They have been working to develop computer literacy programs that do not “assume any computer literacy skills of English language skills...are motivating and educationally sound....that people could use on their own” (p. 353). Their article discusses issues such as movement between objects (pages) and general formatting. Also, although their work is not directly women-centered and intended for all adults, they do their work consciously as women who can make it in the computer industry. Though they don't directly say how this relates to how they make their programs, they state that as cyberfeminists “We need to make sure that our values, our culture and our histories are being distributed as widely as the others, and the best way for us to do that is to be in there and doing it” (p. 367).

It is in this spirit that the website<sup>5</sup> developed under the name of WE LEARN —Women Expanding \* Literacy Education Action Research Network—and including the research from this dissertation project addresses a number of the issues outlined above. Some of the desired

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effects of this website will be immediate, some will need to develop over the long term. In time, literacy communities active on the internet will be reminded of gender-based oppressions through WE LEARN and cyberfeminists who encounter WE LEARN will be reminded of on-going print-based and cyberculture literacy issues for women. The on-going visibility through an active networking systems, e-list cross-postings, and search engine listings will need to happen in order to assist with these goals. Overall, the website can only be one aspect of WE LEARN's work and visibility, but going into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it will become a key component. This work will necessarily need to be accompanied by print-based resource lists, women-centered literacy materials, personal contact and other forms of communications.

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<sup>5</sup> ([www.litwomen.org/WLindex.html](http://www.litwomen.org/WLindex.html))

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**General Literacy Resources on the Internet**

Agency	Website location	Mission as stated on their site
National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) U.S. based	<a href="http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/">http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/</a>	NIFL's mission is to ensure that the highest quality of literacy services is available to all adults [at least 40 million adults in the U.S. need stronger literacy skills]. By fostering communication, collaboration, and innovation, NIFL works to build and strengthen a comprehensive, unified system for literacy in the U.S.
National LINCS  LINCSearch	<a href="http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/index.html">http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/index.html</a>  <a href="http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/search/search.html">http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/search/search.html</a>	LINCS is the literacy community's gateway to the world of adult education and literacy resources on the Internet. The goal of LINCS is to bring adult literacy-related resources and expertise to a single point of access for use throughout the world.
National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL)	<a href="http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/">http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/</a>	The mission of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL, pronounced nick-saul) is to conduct the research, development, evaluation and dissemination needed to build effective and cost-efficient adult learning and literacy programs.
National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL)	<a href="http://www.literacy.org/">http://www.literacy.org/</a>	LITERACY.org is a gateway to electronic resources and tools for the national and international adult literacy communities. The site is jointly sponsored by ILI and NCAL at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education.
National Adult Literacy Database (NALD)  Canada-based	<a href="http://www.nald.ca/index.htm">http://www.nald.ca/index.htm</a>	The National Adult Literacy Database Inc. (NALD) is a federally incorporated, non-profit service organization which fills the crucial need for a single-source, comprehensive, up-to-date and easily accessible database of adult literacy programs, resources, services and activities across Canada. It also links with other services and databases in North America and overseas.

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**Adult Literacy Organizations with Websites**

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Website location</b>	<b>Mission as stated on their site</b>
Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE)	<a href="http://literacynet.org/value/">http://literacynet.org/value/</a>	It is VALUE's mission to help adult learners become effective leaders in their education programs. From that experience, learners can then apply their leadership skills in their communities, workplaces, and families.
Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA)	<a href="http://www.literacyvolunteers.org/home/index.htm">http://www.literacyvolunteers.org/home/index.htm</a>	Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc. (LVA) is a national network of over 350 locally based programs, supported by state and national staff. Our mission is to change lives through literacy.
Laubach Literacy Action	<a href="http://www.laubach.org/">http://www.laubach.org/</a>	Laubach Literacy is a nonprofit educational corporation dedicated to helping adults of all ages improve their lives and their communities by learning reading, writing, math and problem-solving skills.
Literacy Assistance Center (LAC/NYC)	<a href="http://www.lacnyc.org/">http://www.lacnyc.org/</a>	The Literacy Assistance Center (LAC) is a for-profit organization that provides essential referral, training, information and technical assistance services to hundreds of adult and youth literacy programs in New York. Our mission is to support and promote the expansion of quality literacy services in New York.
Student Coalition for Action in Literacy Education (SCALE)	<a href="http://www.unc.edu/depts/scale/womenlit.html">http://www.unc.edu/depts/scale/womenlit.html</a>	The Student Coalition for Action in Literacy Education (SCALE) is a network of college students, adult learners, administrators, literacy practitioners and community partners working to implement and support participatory education and social change work in campus-based literacy programs.

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**Women's Literacy Resources on the Internet**

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Website location</b>	<b>Mission as stated on their site</b>
Literacy Resources / Rhode Island	<a href="http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Sweaver_Center/Literacy_Resources/women.html">http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Sweaver_Center/Literacy_Resources/women.html</a>	<p>Literacy Resources/Rhode Island was established in 1997 to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* expand existing professional capacity within Rhode Island's adult education community;</li> <li>* increase educators' and learners' capacity to use and interact with online technology;</li> <li>* assist in improving delivery of service to adult learners, thereby strengthening adult education provision across the state.</li> </ul>
<p>Women in Literacy/Women in Action (WIL/WIA)</p> <p>division of Laubach Literacy Action</p>	<p><a href="http://www.womeninliteracy.org/index2.html">http://www.womeninliteracy.org/index2.html</a></p> <p><a href="http://www.laubach.org/WIL/USA/usa.html">http://www.laubach.org/WIL/USA/usa.html</a></p>	<p>Women in Literacy/USA was started in 1997 and although it has a different character than the program in developing countries, it too is focused on helping women achieve a level of learning that will help them solve the problems in their lives and attain their goals.</p> <p>Women in Action is the continuation of Laubach Literacy's successful 10-year global initiative - Women in Literacy. The goal of Women in Action is to help women undertake 2,000 life-changing projects in marginalized communities in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Americas by the year 2005.</p>

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