



Women's Alternative and Informal Learning Pathways to Jobs in the IT Sector

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Update 2

Technical Communication: A Feminized Niche in a Masculinized Field

We've now completed almost 50 interviews and one focus group with women in the Lower Mainland/Victoria and Toronto. One thing we've noted is that, within the IT field, women tend to be found in certain jobs or niches. These include project management or human resources jobs, and the technical communication niche – website design and development, technical writing, and research. In reviewing the published literature on gender and IT work, we've also noted that these jobs and niches have often been excluded in previous research.

For her Masters graduating paper, Kaela chose five interviews that she had conducted with technical communicators. The paper discusses how the experiences of women working in the technical communication niche both resemble and differ from those of women working in the more traditionally studied programming and engineering areas. The following summary outlines the highlights from this paper.

Literature Review

- Canadian and international statistics indicate that women's enrolment in computer science and engineering programs which have traditionally led to IT work is relatively low and has been declining.
- The IT field is a complicated place for women, presenting both opportunities and barriers. For example, women working in Canada's IT field tend to earn more than women in many other fields but less than their male colleagues.
- Women in the IT field are less likely to be promoted than their male colleagues (the "glass ceiling" phenomenon) and more likely to be found in the lowest paying jobs and areas ("glass walls").
- Some researchers whose studies involved computer programmers have outlined how women and men tend to relate to, learn about and work with IT. Men often have a more concentrated, almost ob-

sessive interest in IT. In contrast, women are more likely to have a range of interests, and to approach IT as a tool which can help them with those other interests. Also, men are more likely to be comfortable with an approach to learning focused on abstract, formula-based problem-solving, whereas women seem more comfortable with concrete, real-world problem-solving.

Emerging Themes

One way of seeing the IT areas where women are more likely to work is as a response by some women to the knowledge-based society. Creating and working in "feminized" niches in a masculine field can provide ac-

New Project Website!

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cess to challenges, opportunities and status, while it creates a buffer from what some women find as unpleasant experiences. The following themes contribute to that understanding.

- **Understanding technology as a tool:** All five women described IT as “just a tool”. Their work demands interest and skill in IT, but is not limited to that interest and skill. Participants have used IT to convey educational or social justice messages, market corporations, products and services, and express their own creativity. They also spoke of the importance of social relations in their jobs – especially being able to work with and learn from mentors, colleagues, clients and supervisors.
- **The long and winding road:** Although all five women had some post-secondary education, only one participant had completed an IT-specific credential (in internet publishing). While some participants spoke about approaching this niche intentionally, most entered the IT field after studying or working in other, unrelated fields. Some of the participants described how they “fell into” their jobs and the IT field, because of age, timing or a particular job. Ironically, the one participant who did have an IT-related credential had the most difficulties finding work in the IT field. She graduated from her program in 2002, after the IT “crash”, and her experiences remind us that timing relates to opportunities and obstacles in career pursuits.
- **The importance of intuition and “situated” (or, on-the-job) learning:** With little formal IT-related education, participants had to use various other learning strategies to build IT skills and knowledge. From reading manuals or books to “playing” on their computers, tapping into the open-source coding on other websites to learning from colleagues or supervisors, using online tutorials to IT or business networks, participants described a range of learning strategies to supplement or, sometimes, replace more formal courses.
- **Encounters with the “boys’ club”:** Three of the participants had worked in start-up companies and described their experiences with the masculine culture they encountered in those jobs – nicknamed the “boys’ club”. Participants spoke about sexist jokes or attitudes. Outside the centre of the IT field, technical communication has become a way for participants to take advantage of work in the IT field and distance themselves from some of its more offensive aspects.

- **Creating professional identity and the role of passion:** The creation of identity is a complex process. For the participants in this study, identity can be relative to many things: how they view IT, their career aspirations, how much their IT skills and knowledge are recognized. Despite their personal, educational and career differences, the five women spoke about the importance of passion – attraction, enthusiasm and commitment – for a cause or an interest other than IT.

The discussion of implications of this study include a call for future research to include a broader range of IT workers. Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) should be addressed by policy-makers and educators, so that women who decide to pursue formal IT-related education can receive credit for the knowledge and skills that they have developed on-the-job and in other informal ways.

Best Wishes to Toronto RA Danielle Thibedeau!

Some of you know Danielle Thibedeau, the OISE/University of Toronto student who was working with Jen at ACTEW. Danielle completed her Masters and has gone on to work with the Law Society of Upper Canada. Congratulations Danielle, and many thanks for your work on this project!

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