

# Digital Technologies and Gendered Positioning

Tensions and attention in relation to bridging gender norms, education systems and pedagogical professions

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## ABSTRACT

The post-structuralist research project is related to the relations between Digital Technologies and Gendered Positioning. It investigates what constitutes students in a digital and technological domain? How do male and female students in Social Education position and perform themselves in relation to digital technologies?

The results are based on four focus group interviews, fifty questionnaires and ten narratives about student life with ICT and digital technologies.

The study shows indications of how girls and boys perform through static, gendered and stereotypical norms and values in relation to digital technologies throughout childhood and adolescence as well as how they continue to position themselves differently in higher education. The study indicates that a greater understanding of the connections between upbringing, educational systems and the development of pedagogical welfare professions is an important area of interest.

## KEYWORDS

Gender issues, Gender positioning, Higher education, Social educators, Social Education, Students' perspectives, Digital technologies, ICT, Poststructuralism, Performativity

## 1. Background and problem

The international PISA and ICILS studies of the last twenty years point to a remarkable skewness within Danish girls' and boys' approaches to ICT, in which girls have a significantly lower self-efficacy in their own ICT-competencies compared to boys [1]. The results from international measurements show that it requires a significant effort within education to give the Danish girls a more positive perception of themselves with regard to engaging themselves with digital technology.

As teachers of Social Education, we meet more and more students who perceive themselves as insecure or outright incompetent in application of digital technologies. This is mirrored in the pedagogical practice in within the daycare domain, which dominantly employs women. From an educational and professionally oriented perspective, the positions, experiences and approaches of students at the country's most populated education, Social Education, are

investigated in relation to digital technologies. The education is known for having four women for every man enrolled. The answer to how we accomplish engaging more girls and women in technology must necessarily require nuanced answers to what is stopping them. The pedagogical professionals should not reinforce this lack of perceived efficacy.

Regardless of the pedagogical arena that a newly educated member of pedagogical staff should practice, it remains meaningful to be able to support and develop the child's, the youth's or the citizen's opportunity to be an active agent in their own life in a democratic society, also in regard to digital technologies.

## 2. Purpose

The purpose of the study has been to look past the immediate skills, understanding and competencies that students of pedagogy seem to have within the digital-technological domain and instead look to the deeper and more qualified understanding of their starting point. The students do not commence their Social Education as tabula rasa. Instead, they have been raised in communities, cultures and societies that have norms, discourses (e.g. gender, family, school, student and learning discourses) and influences that has shaped, who they are. It is therefore necessary to study the contributions, facilitations and inhibitions of their positions and their genesis in order to understand and challenge these self-perceptions and possibly create new opportunities for different perceptions. Further, build a bridge between the educational systems and welfare-professions at which many women are employed.

The long-term goal is, that the environments created by the education provides the students with open opportunities for new and dynamic development and creation processes within the field of ICT and new technologies - for the duration of their studies and subsequently in their professional lives.

## 3. Theoretical starting point, analysis strategy and method

This study is based on the complex post-structuralist research tradition of situated knowledge. The qualitative methodical approach is inspired by elements of the poststructuralist analytical strategy

[3] such that understanding of phenomena in complex interactions invites complex thinking and approaches. Therefore, the data collection is based on the mosaic-method [4] in which different qualitative approaches are applied. Four exploratory focus group interviews have been conducted. The interviews consisted of 16 students of Social Education in total as well as ten video narratives, that the students had recorded about their 'life' with ICT and digital technologies. And in addition, 50 written answers extracted from a short questionnaire. In all 76 students (23 men, 52 women and one other gender) participated.

Via analyses of social, cultural and subjective genesis processes as well as inspiration from Butler's [2] term about performativity, a search for social norms, positions and non-intentional action patterns, through which we are constituted, was conducted. Performativity is not intentional but is an unaware and bodily process. The self is through repetition created and maintained. Performativity is therefore not a free choice. The study is oriented towards discovering how the students have been 'performed' before they start their studies. This is to break the blind and passive performativity and create active and aware 'performers' in relation to their engagement with digital technologies.

#### 4. Findings and Perspectives

The study found that students categorize themselves in either/or categories as a part of their positionings: Motivated vs. not motivated, interested vs. not interested, can vs. cannot, understand vs. do not understand

Generally, the male participants, involved in the interviews, position themselves as someone who understands ICT and technology. In the interviews they comment on the different digital tools they are presented with and discuss which programs and technologies are good and bad. The female participants, however, talk about what they are not interested, not capable of or what they outright 'hate'. There is an overwhelming majority of women that position themselves in the 'not' categories. Out of 19 women that mentions interested/not interested in the questionnaires 12 positions themselves in "not interested".

The issue with this dichotomous positioning is that it becomes an individual and quantitative relation. "I have a lot vs. little interest/motivation/ability". The positions are rigid providing no opportunity for development. Interest and motivation are not static entities but are instead dynamic phenomena. As such, within the realm of education, an innovative thinking strategy must be applied and frameworks and cultures developed that support the focus on interest, understanding and motivation such that technologies are created and develop in interaction with others and on the basis of the experiences that are shared. This raises new questions like: how are students met by e.g. technology in their education? Which discourses are offered for students to constitute themselves throughout educational settings?

This study draws the picture of a clear, gender-oriented discourse and practice in the homes and families in which the students were raised. In the interviews and narratives, it is found that the father, uncle, grandfather encourage mostly the boys (not the girls) to join them in the garage and 'mess with machines'. It is found in the empirical studies consistently that the father of the house as made sure computers were introduced in the home. Therefore, the access to, and the engagement with various technologies is attached to the male role model. In the questionnaires students was asked to categorize themselves in five categories from 1: "I am not good at ICT" to 5: "Superuser". 16 persons has places themselves in category 4: "I like using ICT and digital technologies". Seven males and nine women. All nine women mention a male role model when asked if they had someone introduce them to ICT. E.g. this quote: "I grew up with digital technology, and I have a father that always has had an interested in teaching us about the technological world". When mothers appear in narratives in relation to the use of technologies, it is seldom as having a great interest for ICT. Mothers primarily occupy the role of warning the daughters (not the sons) to be careful, with what they do online and who they meet. The interviews also mention that mothers also tell the daughters not to spend their time 'gaming', because the daughters should not spend all of their time in front of a screen like their brothers.

The study points to how girls and boys are already throughout their childhood and youth 'performed' via gendered and stereotypical norms and values. A picture forms of how girls and boys continue to position themselves different even in higher education within pedagogical professions. The study indicates that a broader understanding of interactions between upbringing, educational systems and the development of pedagogical welfare professions is a necessary field of interest in order to understand limitations and opportunities within the educational field both for the students of social education but further more to diminish reproduction of limitations from social educators to children and youngsters - and in order to build innovative and intelligent communities with the ambition of increased digital-technological engagement within the pedagogical professions and educations. It is necessary to gain a broad and general technological literacy and to view the interaction between people and technologies as a learning process in the development of their professionalism and - identity.

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