An idea whose time is here: FemTechNet, a Distributed Online Collaborative Course (DOCC)

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In the following, Alex Juhasz and Anne Balsamo discuss FemTechNet, the network they have activated to produce the first distributed online collaborative course (DOCC) that demonstrates not only innovative thinking about emergent technologies, but also addresses -- as its central topic -- the long histories of feminist engagements with technology and cultural innovation. Together, they discuss the motivations and processes whereby feminist teachers, artists and scholars are joining each other to creatively redesign massively open online courses (MOOCs) according to feminist principles. This essay takes the shape of a conversation about the ideas, activities and processes that led to the creation of FemTechNet, as well as the project's innovative thinking about feminism, learning and technology.

Anne Balsamo: Cultural amnesia or ongoing historical ignorance -- how else to describe the lack of understanding about the intimate relationship between feminism and technology? How can it be that, in 2012, smart people still wonder what feminism – and feminists, women, and girls -- have to contribute to our thinking about technology?

When I present my ongoing research on the relationship between culture and technological innovation, I often begin by noting that some of the most useful insights into the project have come from the work of feminist philosophers (Harding, Haraway, Barad, Braidotti). Feminist readers of my work will not find this surprising. But for readers who do not know this tradition, my reference is apparently quite puzzling. Discussions afterwards routinely include someone who asks -- with a discernible note of skepticism in his or her voice -- what does *feminism* have to do with technological innovation?

I've learned how to answer this question more succinctly now, having realized over time that the question-asker wasn't really interested in an exquisite recounting of the history of women's engagement with the practices of invention, patent laws, or high-tech industries, nor in my zealous citation of important feminist work in science and technology studies, visual culture, or media studies more broadly. How I answer is beside the point for this piece, suffice to say that this question has continued to vex me, so much so that I now see it as a symptom of a widespread case of cultural amnesia. How can people in the audiences I typically address (academically trained and highly credentialed technologists) NOT know these histories?

Alex Juhasz: Forty or more years into Women's and Ethnic (and later Queer) Studies' incursions into academia as disciplines of their own, and into established disciplines, we find, to our delight, that feminists have taken on significant positions of power -- as thinkers,

teachers, administrators -- in institutions around the world. Yet we also see that this hard-won authority and agency is itself as silo-ed as are our fields of expertise and practice. How can new technologies allow us to meet, share, and learn across the boundaries of place, field, training, and objects that inhibit feminist connection and movement? How can we mobilize, network, archive and grow our actual institutional power, as well as our discrete intellectual traditions and politicized processes?

FemTechNet has been created to address and redress these questions. The time is now for those of us who are senior scholars in feminist science technology studies, in media arts, in communication, across the disciplines, to join with cutting edge researchers and artists new to these fields.

Alex and Anne: We launched FemTechNet in April 2012 during a series of private conversations about our shared sense of longing for feminist scholarly and artistic community that deeply understood the histories of feminist work as they also focused on pushing the horizon of contemporary efforts. Quite surprisingly, at about this time, we both individually received an email from Carol Stabile announcing the launch of Fembot and a new journal called *Ada*. The creators of Fembot could not have known about our conversations and our longing for an online space.

Clearly, something was in the air. We learned that the team from Fembot was asking similar questions to our own. Talking with them broadened our thinking about the digital support needed for feminist work. From the beginning, we knew we were working on complementary efforts: Fembot and *Ada* focus on publication and public engagement, while FemTechNet focuses on pedagogy and archiving feminist histories. In the best spirit of collaboration, we joined forces, and began sharing resources and networks. We then attended and held meetings with feminist colleagues around the world who were working on similar topics. Meet-ups at conferences during 2012 enabled FemTechNet to grow quickly. FemTechNet now includes more than 300 people. The first major project of FemTechNet is "Feminist Dialogues in Technology," our DOCC, which will take form as a global course to be taught from September through November 2013 in fifteen classrooms around the world.

FemTechNet is both an exploration of topics pertaining to feminism and technology, and a demonstration of feminist technocultural innovation. We see our mission and process as feminist in that size is not of importance, whereas collaboration, experimentation, power sharing and a DIY ethic take center stage. Our project uses technology to enable interdisciplinary and international conversations while privileging situated diversity and networked agency.

How did we get there?

Alex: I did not know Anne Balsamo -- my dearly valued collaborator in FemTechNet -- until quite recently. Of course, I knew *of* her long before our first brainstorming session over vente lattes at the Starbucks near the University of Southern California (USC) in February 2012, as I knew the work and reputations of so many of the women I have since met over the

explosive but brief history of this project. Yet the known and felt presence of our amazing, numerous, and undisputedly influential peers around the globe -- enabled and sustained by decades of feminist scholarship, art, institutions and organizing that have since been broadcast via the internet -- is not the same thing as *knowing* them. Certainly my recent thinking about feminist possibilities online are driven by the certain knowledge that IRL relationships are the glue, inspiration, and solidification most of us need to stay committed to each other digitally.

I decided I wanted to meet Anne in 2011 when I learned online that she had received an NEH Digital Start Up Grant for her project that digitally navigates the AIDS quilt. My work has long focused upon the pandemic and I was planning to write an essay on contemporary AIDS documentaries. I knew Anne was nearby at USC, so I wrote an email and asked if we could talk.

We had lunch. We had so much in common: intellectual interests, academic lineage and rank, middle age, an abiding commitment to feminist theory and politics within and outside academia, a shared sense of the contradictions of feminism's clear losses pressing against its seeming abundance and our own growing authority as mid-career feminists. The loss of a visible and perhaps viable cultural and political presence in the name of feminism has come at the same time that many self-identified feminists, schooled and practiced within decades of academic and activist traditions, find ourselves and our peers in charge of things like departments, programs, universities, and agencies. It was delightful to sit across the table from someone who saw the world in the same confused and yet inspiring way. You must know those rare lunches and their superb conversations: scintillating, sustaining. We don't seem to do this enough! Here, the problem of isolation, or institutional silo-ing (we all work so hard for and at our discrete institutions, or departments or fields), and oddly, its association to feminist power, enters our consideration. (Note to those younger than myself: I wish I had known earlier that notes to women you admire, and with whom you share interests, are always appropriate, perennially appreciated, and often lead to the best sort of professional and political opportunities.)

Six months passed. I wrote the essay on AIDS documentaries. I made a website about online feminism.[i] I had concerns about its design and audience. I remembered my previous lunch with Anne and this time asked her to coffee. I said, "I can't figure out how to find, build, and share feminist community online, even though I feel a hunger and curiosity." Anne replied, "We don't need to invent new structures -- we know how to build communities. A *class* is a great arrangement for building and maintaining a productive group of smart individuals with shared purposes."

Anne: I unburdened my worries about this cultural amnesia to Alex when I met her for lunch that first time. Not only did she immediately understand why I was worried, she also reported that she often encountered a similar phenomenon when talking about early work in feminist media and digital art. I remember thinking: "we should do something about this someday."

When next we met -- six months later -- we moved on to talk about other topics. Alex was interested in brainstorming ways to build an online feminist community. I was interested in

thinking about alternative online learning infrastructures, having participated in a Mozilla open-learning forum at Drumbeat 2011 in Barcelona. What was also influencing our discussions no doubt was the frenzied interest in the notion of MOOCs fueled in part by the media-headlines about the wild success of the Stanford course on Artificial Intelligence offered by two computer science instructors that eventually attracted more than 10,000 online students.

Alex: And then and there at Starbucks, just like that, we had our concept for technologically facilitated, global feminist conversation and pedagogy: a massively distributed feminist learning experiment that would remember and store what had been done within feminism and technology and propel us to new actions and projects. And because we are mid-career professionals, we had just enough private pull at our own institutions, not to mention a shit-load of connections to women similarly (and even more powerfully) positioned. We used the computer and face-to-face meetings at international conferences in a range of fields to spread word of our plan. Thus, we quickly fabricated a working meeting with about ten amazing, mostly full, feminist professors from Canada and the U.S for a day in Los Angeles. To do so, I secured a small research grant ($7000) from my home liberal arts college, and we used it for transport and hospitality: to get strong players in our growing global network together in one town and room. In return, we got an invaluable day of thinking and conversation and the unmappable explosive might of collaborative and committed conversation.

And here's where desire comes in, mixed as it must ever be with history and process. Most of us have been in feminist "collaborative" meetings that go sour fast, that were never really about sharing, that get hijacked by needs that are thought to be bigger than any group's immediate goals. We desire community but can get hurt in the process. But this first FemTechNet meeting, and every other one I have attended since, in person and online, was not derailed by feminist-process gone amok. Why? We have been surprised to see how humble and hungry are our quite commanding peers (and those who lead and follow us in the profession) for fair, elevated, and purposeful conversation and institutions. It's as if they don't usually get this at home (or on the internet) even though we live in an era supposedly defined by abundant conversation and growing feminist influence, at least at the institutional level. And we've seen that an almost unimaginable generosity grows from this need, one defined as much by a sharing of isolated, even stockpiled and hard-won resources, as by an open-hearted allocation of discriminating and lovely spirit. You see, Anne and I had only a few principles to begin our fields-wide conversations: we would work with all the scholars and artists who we admire, share our interests, and who feel they belong. No divas were allowed; we would not expend our precious resource of face-time managing personalities over ideas.

Anne: After this meeting, the dots were simple to connect. We had begun the process of activating our networks of colleagues who do research and teach on feminism, science, technology and media. The meeting proved to be an invitation to plan and participate in a DEMONSTRATION of the practice of feminist innovation. I had the notion that one facet of the innovation would focus on rethinking the very idea of the massively open online course THROUGH a feminist logic. The course would cover topics central to feminist studies of science, technology, and media.

If all goes as planned, the first FemTechNet courses -- "Dialogues in Feminism and Technology" -- will be taught between September and November 2013. Unlike a MOOC, where the instructors and course experts are centralized at a single institution (i.e., Stanford, Harvard, MIT), in this DOCC, students from across the globe enroll "at large" to learn (access the knowledge) from the center. The "Dialogues in Feminism and Technology" DOCC is built on the notion that not only the students but also the teachers/instructors/experts, as well as the institutional infrastructures for granting "credit" or supporting a learning community, are all distributed across the globe. Even though Alex and Anne serve as the coordinators of the "Dialogues in Feminism and Technology" DOCC, they are neither the instructors nor the main learning designers. The teachers are those who arrange to offer a nodal class for students enrolled in their educational institutions. The teachers are those who agree to offer "independent studies," "directed reading experiences," or extra credit for those students who seek credit for participating in the DOCC. The teachers are those who sign on as "at-large" learners, who want to engage in the material offered as part of the course. The teachers are those who "drop in" as informal learners because they are interested in a particular topic on the course schedule. The teachers are also the students. Everyone is a participant in a massively distributed work of feminist innovation.

The last piece of the initial vision, the last dot to connect, so to speak, was to address the issue of feminist histories and the digital archive. The purpose here is not simply to demonstrate a contemporary example of feminist technocultural innovation, but to structure the remembering of feminist contributions to the history of technology. In short we need not only to produce new innovation, but also to reproduce the insights from the long history of the engagement among women and technologies. In hindsight it was probably the obvious next step. We would ask all participants in the network -- and not just those participating in the DOCC -- to take part in a collaborative learning activity that focuses on "writing" women and feminists into the global digital archive. We call this project "Storming Wikipedia." We are also inviting them to both submit and/or evaluate the course materials: *videos, readings, keywords, games, web resources that have been contributed and evaluated for their pedagogic value by the network.*

Drawing on contemporary learning theory, we define the course materials as "learning objects," and seek to develop learning objects that learn through use. A "learning object" is a piece or collection of pedagogical materials (including things that we might identify as <u>content</u> items (articles, images, videos), <u>activities</u>, and <u>assessment</u> <u>methods</u>) that serve a specific learning objective. The most sophisticated approach to the design of digital learning objects suggests that we need to create them so that they can be easily annotated or modified by users to include information about the conditions of their use and the effectiveness of learning that is enabled. Ideally, digital learning objects should over time evolve to archive the meaningfulness of their use in particular situations.[ii]

Drawing on contemporary work in feminist science and technology research, we are working with an expanded notion of a "learning object" to incorporate insights about "boundary objects." This theoretical reframing asserts that the "object" participates in the creation of meanings: of identity, or usefulness, of function, of possibilities. The concept of a "boundary

object" was promoted by the late Susan Leigh Starr (a prominent feminist scholar in science/technology studies) to assert that objects (material, digital, discursive, conceptual) participate in the co-production of reality. At base, the notion asserts that objects perform important communication "work" among people: they are defined enough to enable people to form common understandings, but weakly determined so that participants can modify them to express emergent thinking.[iii]

In FemTechNet we refer to the educational materials to be used in the DOCC as "boundary objects that learn" (BOTLs). The pedagogical objects or collections of objects that will be submitted by members of the network will be considered through these theoretical perspectives. While we are still developing the fuller theoretical explication of this approach, in summary we assert that:

1) objects are ontologically multi-faceted;
2) objects participate in the human process of meaning-making;
3) objects serve as means of communication over differences, over place, over time;
4) objects mediate the identities of human participants as members of groups or as individuals;
5) and, more specifically for this project, digital technologies enable learning objects to be modified by those who use the object in specific learning situations.

Following this, the BOTLs that will be used in the "Dialogues in Feminism and Technology" DOCC will not only be submitted by participants in the DOCC, but also evaluated, assessed, and redesigned by those members. The creation of BOTLs is one of the experiments at the heart of the FemTechNet DOCC. The notion of "boundary objects that learn" to be contributed and evaluated for pedagogic use by members of the network manifests the distributed nature of expertise within the networks.

Alex: Since the lunch that led to coffee that led to the vision that led to the meeting, we've grown our network, begun to secure funds and institutional affiliations, started to architect and build our technological needs, designed the structure for our DOCC, and shared authorial agency with any one who steps up and contributes. While we started something by naming a need and exemplifying some processes, it is our hope that *FemTechNet* will evolve into an ongoing global course that goes through many iterations based on the objectives that emerge from its participating members. *FemTechNet* makes use of the openings and opportunities afforded by technology that are laced with individual desire, networked power, and particular place. We use digital and other devices to activate our network of likeminded people (working in feminism and technology across a wide range of disciplines) so as to archive past practices and initiate contemporary conversation and pedagogy. Anyone can join the network and help build the class and its learning materials; anyone can teach the class within their home institution; anyone can take the class for credit (by registering through the home institution and making arrangements with a supportive faculty member), anyone can audit or drop-in on the course as "self-directed learners."

Despite the ambitious objective to offer at least one nodal course on every continent, our aims for this work of feminist innovation are quite straightforward: for eight weeks in 2013 we

want people around the globe to be talking, learning, and writing about feminism and technology. And after those eight weeks, we want the global archive of digital culture to be better informed than it was before we started.

Alex and Anne: To build FemTechNet, we are guided by long-standing feminist principles and processes. These include:

- a commitment to sharing power, tempered by an understanding that hierarchies can be useful at times;
- a commitment to interactions and structures that respect and enable diversity of opinion, experience, and position;
- an understanding that technology can enable interaction, and that all interaction is located, embodied, and material;
- a commitment to creating safe spaces for collaboration;
- the creative rethinking of inherited structures, technologies, and infrastructures to be responsive to what Beth Coleman calls an "x-reality"[iv] that includes online and offline spaces and experiences.

These are the abiding and structuring feminist principles that bring us together and that allow us to know when we're in good company and doing good work. These are the principles that underlie the invitation to others to join this networking project. This account of the creation of FemTechNet foregrounds process over product; the personal over the institutional. Watching how quickly the idea of FemTechNet was propagated through various networks, we understand now that nothing can stop an idea whose time has come, especially when the world's best feminist thinkers are engaged in making it happen.

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[i] See *Feminist Online Spaces*: http://www.feministonlinespaces.com.

[ii] For a helpful set of references about learning objects see the site created by the Center for International Education and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee: http://www4.uwm.edu/cie/learning_objects.cfm?gid=55

[iii] One of the key articles describing this approach to boundary objects is Susan Leigh Starr and James R. Grisemer, '"Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology," *Social Studies of Science* (Vol. 19, No. 3, 1989), 387-420.

[iv] Beth Coleman, *Hello Avatar!* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).