



Chapter XVI

Digital Access, ICT Fluency, and the Economically Disadvantaged: Approaches to Minimize the Digital Divide

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Abstract

The digital divide is a complex phenomenon inextricably linked to income security and not easily addressed through programs that provide simple solutions of training and access. This chapter details the importance of digital access and fluency as they relate to economic disadvantage and explores a variety of models that are used to address the problem. The chapter argues that programs addressing digital divide issues require a multi-faceted approach to address a variety of needs that exist as a result of the condition. While there may be a clash between community, educational, and employer groups, the chapter proposes an alliance model of stakeholders working towards common goals as well as their own organizational interests.

Introduction

The rapid increase of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has irrevocably changed the nature of educational and work environments in Western countries in the past decade. As recently as the mid-1990s, the use of technology in most post-secondary programs was limited to the use of PowerPoint for instructional delivery and word processors for assignments. In a few short years, ICT tools such as course management systems, synchronous capability, the Internet, and wireless devices, have provided students new conditions with which to obtain, manage, communicate, and construct knowledge. Graduates of educational programs bring these skills to the workplace, making access to emerging technologies and the cultural capital needed to be fluent in their use a prerequisite for academic, social, and future vocational success (Wilhelm, Carmen, & Reynolds, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2002).

A continuing dilemma in the field of adult education is the issue of access and equity for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Levine and Nidiffer (1996) found that post-secondary enrollment rates have improved in the previous half-century for all students with barriers to education, with the exception of those students with economic barriers. ICT is constantly evolving and continues to be costly for students who are economically disadvantaged and, in many cases, have had limited or superficial access to these tools (Statistics Canada, 2003; Wilhelm et al., 2002; US Department of Commerce, 2000). As proficiency with ICT is increasingly linked with job and income security (Krahn & Lowe, 2002), becoming proficient beyond the basic use of these technologies has become a key requirement for economically disadvantaged adults to realize vocational and therefore economic aspirations. How educators and the society that they serve accommodate the economically disadvantaged is a key question to those who consider the accessibility of education to be a core value.

Education has long been viewed as a means to equalize social and economic disparity within society. Access to and equity in education are the characteristics that facilitate such equal opportunity. However, educational organizations are limited in tackling such a complex problem. Instead, the answer lies in alliances of various organizations—both public and private—working towards common goals while fulfilling their own organizational interests. The focus of this chapter is to explore the relationship between economic restructuring, the economically disadvantaged, and the need for ICT fluency in this new and ever-changing environment. The chapter will review quantitative and qualitative data describing the phenomenon and will synthesize various approaches developed in response. Finally, the chapter will suggest directions for program response and areas for further research.

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