
Digital Access as an Equity Issue: The Community College and the Digital Divide

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In her nuanced discussion of teenagers and their use of digital technology, danah boyd argues that there are far-reaching consequences for assuming that young students are naturally digitally savvy and older adults are digitally hampered; we assume younger students are digital natives adept at using and understanding technology, while adults are digital immigrants, still learning the language and culture of the digital world (2014: 176-193). In fact, “Familiarity with the latest gadgets or services is often less important than possessing the critical knowledge to engage productively with networked situations, including the ability to control how personal information flows and how to look for and interpret accessible information” (boyd, 2014: 180), and she further cautions that “access to technology should not be conflated with use” (boyd, 2014:192).

But access is not universal. Even among teenagers, there are different levels of participation because of the access to the technology, the quality of the access related to the socioeconomic status of the teenager and the consequent different levels of digital skills (See Hargittai, 2008). While young, wealthier students may have access without sufficient knowledge about the limitations and challenges of their digital access, students from lower socioeconomic groups may not even have access except through the technology provided by their schools, libraries and other local institutions. The economic divide contributes to the digital divide.

This digital divide is further exacerbated by the institutional divisions and economic resources between two-year comprehensive community colleges and four-year institutions. Anne B. McGrail, a community college instructor herself, in her discussion of the role digital humanities might play in the community colleges, asks “What are community

colleges and their students missing out on in their exclusion from DH discourse, and how might intentional engagement with DH methods and tools help community college students become active agents of discovery and change in their lives?” (McGrail, 2016). These questions are particularly pointed given that many of the students at the comprehensive community colleges intend to transfer to four-year institutions and see the two-year colleges as an affordable first entry into college. If digital humanities is “the next big thing” as William Pannacker announced in his 2010 blog in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, is digital access another inequity in the system of higher education?

But how are digital access and inequality linked? At traditional four-year institutions, instructors may find the digital divide initially a challenge because of the access that students have had prior to their matriculation, but once they are enrolled, the institution provides digital access and support for both students and instructors. The learning curve may be steep for some students, but there are footholds on the way up. At the community colleges, however, which typically enrolls a variety of diverse students, a range from nontraditional students, who may be returning students apprehensive about their abilities, who may be limited in time and financial resources, and who are less likely to have access to or to use digital technology, to the more traditional students who nevertheless do not have the economic resources to access the newest digital resources, the digital divide begins at enrollment and may continue after enrollment. Both groups may be under-prepared, under-resourced and have issues of persistence. Yet, contrary to the four-year institutional model, the divide is further complicated because community colleges and their instructors, many of whom are adjuncts with peripatetic careers, are also under-resourced and lacking strong support for the digital humanities. The digital divide begins at enrollment and continues even after enrollment.

This presentation directly addresses these issues of digital access and equity among community college students. In particular, I examine the implications of the digital divide among the community college population: the problems of access and use among community college students both before and after they enroll, the different levels and aspects of digital preparedness for students, instructors and administrators, and the institutional issues of support and resources to create robust digital humanities at the comprehensive community college. I discuss in

detail academic planning and creation of institutional support including establishment of Makerspaces and digital labs, professional development opportunities for faculty, and the creation of assignments that address some of these issues.

Bibliography

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