Dismantling the Digital Divide: A Multicultural Education Framework

By Paul C. Gorski

Multicultural education calls for all aspects of education to be continuously examined, critiqued, reconsidered, and transformed based on ideals of equity and social justice. This includes instructional technology and covers its content and delivery (or curriculum and pedagogy) (Gorski, 2000). That is, it is not enough to critically examine the individual resources—in this case, CD-ROMs, Web sites, or pieces of software—we use to ensure inclusivity.

Instead, we must dig deeper and consider the medium itself and how it is being used differently in different contexts. What roles are various software titles, Web sites, and the computers that facilitate our use of them, playing in education? Are they contributing to education equity or supporting current systems of control and domination of those groups already historically privileged in the United States education system (such as White people, boys and men, first language English speakers, and able-bodied people)?

The term “digital divide” has traditionally described inequalities in access to computers and the Internet between groups of people based on one or more social or cultural identifiers (Clark & Gorski, 2001). Under this conceptualization, researchers tend to compare rates of access to these technologies across individuals or schools based on race, sex, disability status, and other identity dimensions. The “divide” refers to the difference in access rates among groups. The racial digital divide, for example, describes the difference in rates of access to computers and the Internet, at home and school, between those racial groups with high rates of access (White people and Asian and Asian-American people) and those with lower rates of access (Black people and Latina[ol people).

Similarly, the sex- or gender digital divide refers to the gap in access rates between men and women. So, by August 2000, when women surpassed men to become a majority of the United States online population (NTIA, 2000), many people also believed the sex digital divide had disappeared. If there were more women than men using the Internet, the logic went, equality had been achieved. Girls and women were equally likely to use computers and the Internet as boys and men. Still, though the fact that more girls and women were using the Internet is a meaningful step forward, a broader and deeper look at their position in relation to the increasingly techno-centric society and global economy reveals that equal access is considerably different from equitable access.

Equal But Inequitable: An Example from the Gender Divide

Most of the sex and gender inequalities in society are replicated online. For example, research shows that the same sexist communication dynamics that can be observed in board rooms and corporate offices every day are just as easily observed within online discussion forums, despite popular belief that such forums are discrimination free because users cannot see each other. This includes both male dominance of discussion and a lack of respect and acknowledgement of women’s contributions (Gerrard, 1999; Grigar, 1999).

In addition, the ever-present and ever-growing Internet pornography industry (Rich, 2001), along with the threat of cyber-stalking (Crary, 2001) and the relative ease with which potential sexual predators can attain personal information about women online, make the Internet a hostile—and potentially dangerous—environment for many girls and women.

Equally hostile to women are academic and professional pursuits of mathematics, sciences, engineering, computer sciences (Turkle, 1991)—all traditionally male fields that are closely linked with computers and the Internet. Research shows how women and girls are systematically steered away from these fields beginning as early as elementary school through school culture, classroom climate, traditional gender roles, and other societal pressures (Clark & Gorski, in press). For example, of the 24,768 bachelor’s degrees in computer and information sciences conferred during the 1996-97 academic year, fewer than 7,000 were earned by women. Fewer than one in six doctoral degrees in this field were conferred to women (NCES, 1999). In fact, despite popular belief, the number of women earning degrees in computer-related fields has been declining since 1986. The gap in the percentages of men and women earning degrees in the field continues to increase (Carver, 2000).

Additionally, video games, largely marketed for men and boys, often depict girls and women as damsels in distress or sideshow prostitutes. Even those games, such as Tomb Raider, that challenge these stereotypical roles by casting strong, independent, heroic female characters in lead roles dress these big-breasted women with impossibly-dimensioned bodies in tight, revealing clothes. Most video game makers are men and most video game consumers are boys and men (Gerrard, 1999). So instead of critiquing this fact and considering why it is so, the producers bow to market pressures and recycle the industry sexism. Unfortunately, a majority of information technology professionals cite video games as their initial point of interest in the field (AAUW, 2000).

As a result of these and other socio-political, socio-historical, and socio-cultural dynamics, as women became over 50 percent of the online population, only 27 percent of all Bachelor’s-level computer science degrees were conferred to women (a 10 percentage point decrease since 1984) (NCES, 1999) and only 20 percent of all information technology professionals were women (AAUW, 2000). So, while equality in access rates reflects an important step forward, it does not, by any useful measurement, signify the end of the sex digital divide or significantly temper its larger implications. In fact, the glaring inequities that remain despite equality in Internet access illustrate the urgency for a deeper, broader understanding of the digital divide and a deeper, broader approach for eliminating it.
Drawing Connections with Other Dimensions of the Divide

These remaining inequities, which mirror deeply entrenched and historically cycled inequities in professional, economic, and education opportunities for women in the United States, together serve as a clear, powerful critique of the uni-dimensional approach most often employed for addressing the race and class digital divide: simply providing schools and communities with more computers and more, or faster, Internet access. Again, though this is a positive step forward, it fails to address social, cultural, and political factors that will be in place with or without more machinery.

For example, research indicates that, while teachers in schools with a high percentage of White students and a low percentage of students on free or reduced lunch programs are more likely to use these technologies to engage students in creative and critical thinking activities, teachers in schools with a high percentage of students of color and a high percentage of students on free or reduced lunch tend to use computers and the Internet for a skills and drills approach to learning (NCES, 2000).

Additionally, the growing online presence of African Americans and Latina(o) is tempered by the growing number of white supremacy Web sites and a more intense sense of fear and vulnerability among these groups (along with Native Americans) related to the availability of personal information online (EDA, 1999; Spooner & Rainie, 2000).

Ultimately, the traditional understanding of the digital divide as a series of gaps in rates of physical access to computers and the Internet fails to capture the full picture of the divide, its stronghold, and its educational, social, cultural, and economic ramifications. Meanwhile, such a narrow conceptualization of the divide serves the interests of privileged groups who can continue to critique access rates instead of thinking critically and reflectively about their personal and collective roles in cycling and recycling old inequities in a new cyber-form.

A new understanding of the digital divide is needed—one that provides adequate context and begins with a dedication to equity and social justice throughout education. Multicultural education—a field that enters every discussion about education with this dedication—offers an important, desperately needed framework for such an understanding. It is from that framework that I have crafted the following statement about understanding and eliminating the digital divide.

Toward a New Approach for Dismantling the Divide

A multicultural education approach to understanding and eliminating the digital divide:

(1) critiques technology-related inequities in the context of larger educational and societal inequities, keeping at the fore of the discussion the fact that those groups most disenfranchised by the digital divide are the same groups historically disenfranchised by curricular and pedagogical practices, evaluation and assessment, school counseling, and all other aspects of education (and society at large);

(2) broadens the significance of "access" beyond that of physical access to computers and the Internet to include access to support and encouragement to pursue and value technology-related fields, educationally and professionally (at home, in school, in the media, by peer groups, etc.);

(3) broadens the significance of "access" beyond that of physical access to computers and the Internet to include access to non-hostile, inclusive software and Internet content;

(4) critically examines not only who has access to computers and the Internet, but how these technologies are being used by various people or identity groups or by those teaching various people or groups;

(5) considers, in the context of studying access rates with this broader definition of "access," the larger socio-political ramifications of, and socio-economic motivations for, the expanding significance of information technology, not only in schools, but in society at large, and how the growing merger of cyber-culture with wider U.S. culture privileges those who already have access in the broadest sense;

(6) confronts capitalistic propaganda, like commercials portraying children from around the world announcing their recent arrival online, that lead people to believe that these technologies are available to everyone, everywhere, under any conditions, who want to use them;

(7) rejects as simplistic and patriarchal any program that purports to "close" the divide only by providing more computers and more, or faster, Internet access, to a school, library, or other public place;

(8) rejects as inadequate any solution that aims to "close" and not "eliminate" the divide; and

(9) conceptualizes the elimination of the digital divide as those actions that:

(a) lead to, and maintain, a present and future in which all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, disability status, age, education level, or any other social or cultural identity, enjoy equitable access—safe, comfortable, encouraged and encouraging, non-hostile, and valued physical, cultural, social access—to information technology including software, computers, the and Internet;

(b) lead to, and maintain, a present and future in which all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, disability status, age, education level, or any other social or cultural identity, enjoy equitable access—safe, comfortable, encouraged and encouraging, non-hostile, and valued physical, cultural, social access—to educational pursuits in technology-related fields including mathematics, science, computer science, and engineering;

(c) lead to, and maintain, a present and future in which all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, disability status, age, education level, or any other social or cultural identity, enjoy equitable access—safe, comfortable, encouraged and encouraging, non-hostile, and valued physical, cultural, social access—to career pursuits in technology-related fields including mathematics, science, computer science, engineering, and information technology;
Dear Editor:

I am writing in response to the article that appeared in the Multicultural Education journal titled, "From Racial Stereotyping and Deficit Discourse Toward the Critical Race Theory in Teacher Education." I agree wholeheartedly that teachers need to address the issues of oppression in the classroom and teach students how to identify forms of racism, stereotyping, sexism, and other forms of oppression. It is important to teach about white privilege.

A good resource would be the Peggy McIntosh 1988 article titled "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." In the article the author explains how her life is easier because she is a white woman. As an educator, I need to be aware of my white privilege and avoid falling into teaching using stereotypes. Students do not perform successfully when they are dealing with teachers that already think that they are going to fail no matter how hard the student tries.

Although I agree with the article, I was left looking for more information on ways of bringing Critical Race Theory into my classroom. The authors' approach in this article is to teach only about oppression and how to identify oppression in the mass media. The authors do not explain how to make a successful classroom that is open to cultural differences. If students are only taught to identify oppression and not taught that we are alike as well, students may become less diverse because it becomes a "them and us" conflict. Another article that appeared in your journal titled "Multicultural Activities throughout the Year" (Saul & Saul; Volume 8, Issue 4, page 38) discusses the importance of teaching multicultural education throughout the year and to also teach that people are alike as well as different. This would be a good reference.

I appreciate the knowledge that I have gained in these articles to be able to bring multicultural education into the classroom and continue my education and understanding of diversity in the classroom.

Sincerely,

Christian A. Showers
St. Cloud, Minnesota