Digital Equity: Not just an 'add on' but business as usual

Julie Willems
Monash University, Australia

Helen Farley
University Southern Queensland, Australia

Katie Freund
Australian National University, Australia

Darren Britten
La Trobe University, Australia

Sue Tickner
University of Auckland, New Zealand

Sue Tucker
Charles Darwin University, Australia

Jane Garner
RMIT University, Australia

Chris Campbell
Griffith University, Australia

Lucia Stejar
Kaplan Professional, Australia

Meredith Hinze
University of Melbourne, Australia

Maggie Hartnett
Massie University, New Zealand

Ashwini Datt
University of Auckland, New Zealand

Marnie Nolton
Murdoch University, Australia

Digital equity is a moral and strategic imperative in higher education in Australasia, especially as more universities provide online only offerings of courses and programs. Often, however, equity issues are considered remedially as an 'add-on' after the fact in terms of business-as usual in tertiary education institutions. There are many cohorts that may not have access to the digital technologies and connectivity they need to participate fully in higher education including those from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds, those from regional and remote areas, refugees and incarcerated students. This symposium shines a spotlight on digital equity, capturing both the student and staff experiences, thereby suggesting ways in which equity matters may be considered. The symposium is timed to contribute to the inaugural [World Access to Higher Education Day](#) (28 November 2018).

Keywords: digital equity; students; higher education; access; participation; inclusion

Digital Equity

The degree of access to digital technologies and connectivity across Australia varies considerably (Thomas et al., 2016), which becomes particularly significant when considering access to higher education. Universities are increasingly moving online in either blended or fully online modes (Farley & Willems, 2017), and access to digital technologies and reliable Internet connectivity is necessary to enable full participation by students. Inclusiveness is also essential for considerations in course design, instruction and facilitation, including when developing teacher presence (Richardson et al., 2015). Consequently, digital equity is a vital consideration in higher education.

In line with the Bradley Report (2008), higher education institutions are aiming to widen participation for certain equity groups including those from low socio-economic backgrounds, remote and restricted communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians among others. In addition, there are differences in the use and adoption of technologies between genders, with women being less likely to access both technology and the Internet (Dixon et al., 2014). However, it is also these groups who are least likely to have access to digital technologies and reliable connectivity. For example, just over half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians living in remote Australia accessed the Internet in the last 12 months (Thomas et al., 2016). As universities strive to recruit an ever more diverse student cohort, and to deliver more education through online learning experiences, they are struggling to meet those cohorts' needs in terms of technology and access (Farley & Willems, 2017).

Digital equity has strong implications for learning design. Aside from the considerations around accessibility of learning materials and the tools and platforms institutions use, there is a consistent increase in embedding digital literacy development into the curriculum across all disciplines at all institutions (Morgan, et al., 2017). In

disciplines under pressure to transform more traditional forms of assessment, such as long form essays in the humanities, access to digital content producing equipment and consistency in use of comparable equipment, present challenges. One example is students in history subjects being given the option to submit video essays or vlogs. This digital medium is well suited to the narrative and storytelling approaches embedded within the discipline but requires careful scaffolding on the behalf of learning designers and teaching staff (Tong, Evans, Williams, Edwards & Robinson, 2015).

Symposium structure

This one-hour symposium has three distinct parts.

A. Voices of the educationally disadvantaged
First, it introduces participants to the multi-faceted nature of digital equity, the lens of the student experience. The symposium will commence by sharing the lived student and related educator experiences in access and participation in higher education in Australasia, as seen through the lens of equity groups and equity overlap (Willems, 2010). These student experiences will be highlighted via role play.

B. Discussion with participants about shared experiences in digital equity issues
Following the role play, the session will shift into an active sharing and participatory phase wherein participants will be asked to share digital equity experiences that either they or their students have experienced, providing insights into both the student and educator perspectives.

C. What changes can be made?
Finally, the session will conclude by offering practical examples of things that can be done to assist students in various situations. We will be promoting a move towards a more proactive business-as-usual model for considerations around digital equity, rather than the way it is sometimes considered remedially as an 'add-on' after the fact. The symposium will conclude by inviting participants not already involved to join ASCILITE's Digital Equity Special Interest Group (SIG).

Conclusion

This symposium will provide insights into the student experience of those without reliable access to digital technologies and the Internet. These cohorts would include incarcerated students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, students from refugee backgrounds, students living in regional and remote Australia, those from low SES backgrounds, first in family, language other than English (LOTE), and those with disability which precludes them from accessing digital technologies. The Symposium aligns with a range of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Gough, 2018; United Nations, 2015), which seek to redress inequality with regards to access, education and participation. Examples are SDG 4 'Quality Education', SDG 5 'Gender Equality', and SDG 16 'Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions'.

Further, the timing of this symposium adds to the activities around the globe to highlight access to, and participation in, higher education. World Access to Higher Education Day is a new day to heighten awareness and global attention towards inequality in access to higher education and to accelerate action, held this year on 28 November 2018. This symposium will contribute to this call for collective global action.

Acknowledgements

References

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian higher education*. Canberra: DEEWR.

Dixon, J. L., Correa, T., Straubhaar, J., Covarrubias, L., Graber, D., Spence, J., & Rojas, V. (2014). Gendered space: The Digital divide between male and female users in internet public access sites. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 19, 991– 1009. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12088

Farley, H., & Willems, J. (2017). Farley, H. & Willems, J. (2017). Digital equity: diversity, inclusion and access for incarcerated students in a digital age. In H. Partridge, K. Davis, & J. Thomas. (Eds.), Me, Us, IT! Proceedings ASCILITE2017: 34th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education (pp. 68-72).

Gough, A. (2018). Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education: Challenging Imperatives. In I. Davies, L-C. Ho, D. Kiwan, C. Peck, A. Peterson, E. Sant & Y. Waghid (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Citizenship and Education* (pp.295-312). Palgrave. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59733-5_19

Morgan, R., Meldrum, K., Bryan, S., Mathiesen, B., Yakob, N., Esa, N., & Ziden, A. A. (2017). Embedding Digital Literacies in Curricula: Australian and Malaysian Experiences. In T. G. & C. S. (Eds.), *Empowering 21st century learners through holistic and enterprising learning* (pp. 11-19). Singapore: Springer.

Richardson, J., Koehler, A., Besser, E., Caskurlu, S., Lim, J., & Mueller, C. (2015). Conceptualizing and investigating instructor presence in online learning environments. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 16*(3), 256-297. Retrieved from doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v16i3.2123

Thomas, J., Barraket, J., Ewing, S., MacDonald, T., Mundell, M., & Tucker, J. (2016). *Measuring Australia's digital divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2016*. Retrieved from Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved from: http://apo.org.au/system/files/66243/apo-nid66243-16336.pdf

Tong, J., Evans, S., Williams, H., Edwards, N., & Robinson, G. (2015). Vlog to death: Project Eliseg's video-blogging. *Internet Archaeology, 39*(3). doi:10.11141/ia.39.3

United Nations (2015). Sustainable Development Goals. Retrieved from: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/

Willems, J. (2010). The Equity Raw-Score Matrix – a multi-dimensional indicator of potential disadvantage in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development, 29*(6), 603-621, doi: 10.1080/07294361003592058