Introduction

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A major reason we entered the field of distance education, and a prominent factor in our ongoing involvement, is related to the provision of access to education. Wedemeyer (1981) highlights a moral aspect of distance education, one to which we remain committed: "Instruction should be available any place where there are students—or even only one student—whether or not there are teachers at the same place at the same time" (p. 36).

A recent research project has seen us considering the issue of access to online learning. We view online learning as closely connected to distance education (Anderson & Simpson, 2005) and so we see the issue of access, which lies at the heart of distance education, as central also to online learning. Although online learning holds great promise, it appears not to hold the promise of universal access to learning opportunities.

There are two sides to the issue of access. One is the question of supply. In online learning terms we might, for example, visit the question of broadband access. In New Zealand the government has recently regulated to improve the provision of broadband services. At a more fundamental level, governments have engaged in projects to provide infrastructure enabling the provision of broadband. Project Probe in New Zealand is one such example. One of Probe's primary objectives—to provide broadband services to provincial schools, local government, and business interests—was achieved by the end of 2005, at which stage 891 schools could access broadband (State Services Commission, 2006). Another such project is NetWork BC, a project of the provincial government of British Columbia which aims to provide broadband services to small rural and remote communities. Similar projects can be found worldwide. They talk about "bridging the digital divide" but often forget to mention that the bridge is normally a toll bridge.

The other side of the access issue is demand. Rather prosaically we might suggest that it is possible to lead a horse to water but somewhat harder to make it drink. In responding to this issue we find that, like the old joke, there is good news and bad news. The good news is that supply projects often seem to work in some measure. For instance, the NetWork BC project was tied in with the BC Campus initiative to increase the number of students learning online in British Columbia—and targets for enrolments in BC Campus have been met. But there are circumstances in which provision, even free provision, of services is not enough. That is the bad news.

In 2003 Crump and McIlroy conducted a study concerning the use of a community computing facility in a lower socioeconomic area in Wellington. The

facility was situated in a city council high-rise apartment block and offered free access to the Internet. Investigations into usage revealed that after six months the majority of residents in the apartments still did not use the ICT facilities. A survey of non-users within the apartment block was undertaken to obtain information about computer access and usage, tenants' knowledge of and interest in the facility, factors that would encourage ICT usage, and reasons for tenants not using the facility. Analysis of the survey results led the authors to conclude that the digital divide would not be addressed through universal physical access to computer technology. They added, "With approximately 70 percent of the apartment population on state benefits, the struggle to meet basic needs is greater than for those people in work. Interest in accessing computing, even when situated in a convenient social space, and offered at no charge, is unlikely to be seen as a priority for daily living" (Crump & McIlroy, 2003).

A similar tale is told in the final report of the Wired Up Communities (WUC) project which occurred in the United Kingdom from 2000 to 2002 (Devins, Darlow, Petrie, & Burden, 2003). "The aim of WUC was to bridge the digital divide by enabling communities to use ICT to access jobs, learning opportunities, government and other services . . . and sought to provide ICT to enable home access to the Internet and to develop associated services to help to overcome barriers to use of the Internet" (p. ii). The WUC was partially successful, but a final survey found that in homes where technology was provided free of charge to enable residents to access the Internet, 25 percent of participants did not bother to do so citing lack of interest or lack of time. In addition, the report indicates, "There are concerns which have been voiced by both local and national stakeholders that the intervention has not reached those most at risk of exclusion" (p. 43) from the "information society." Simpson (2005, p. 92) concludes, "The development of online services and the trend toward the 'information society' will leave groups without access to the Internet even further excluded from the ability to exercise democratic rights and claim the full benefits of that society," where foremost among those benefits is access to education online.

Following on from the WUC report, the UK government funded a project to examine the potential of online learning to overcome social exclusion and to identify the factors that influence participation, drop out, and successful completion in online learning, especially in relation to learners who are socially or economically disadvantaged (see http://www.niace/org.uk/online/index.asp). The project is scheduled for completion this year, and indications are that it is providing valuable information about how online learning might promote social inclusion.

What these projects reveal is that considerable work is required to ensure the advantages of online learning reach everyone. Provision of supply is not sufficient, even if there is no charge. The moral imperative behind Wedemeyer's statement must be reinforced with political action if distance education is to continue serving all its communities in the online age.

Booth's article in this issue of the journal highlights the issue of access. He reports on an interesting trial project in which students are able to access career advice

and counselling online—any time, any place—provided they can access the Internet. The service, which is an online version of that available to all students in schools, may eventually extend to all students attending schools in New Zealand. Whether or not they will be able to take advantage of the opportunity may depend on their social or economic circumstances—unfortunately, since Booth reports the real potential of such a service.

Two further articles, Heinrich's on a tool to assist assessment and Henderson's on support of distance students, are accompanied by a response from Wyles to Roy's article on Open Source Software in the previous issue of the journal. To round out the issue, Murray reports on a further TeLRF research project and a number of book reviews are included.

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