EDITORIAL

New Digital Divides in Higher Education

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The introduction of the Internet and its growing use in our societies in the 1990s was accompanied by major concerns on the existence of what was commonly labelled 'digital divide'. The possibilities that individuals did or did not have to access the web were, and continue to be, a determining factor with major personal, professional and social consequences. As a result of public and private policies on the introduction of technological infrastructures in most countries and, in particular, owing to significant progress in mobile phone technology, today the digital divide is being bridged at great speed when considering access.

In the field of education, and higher education in particular, swift progress has been made in the provision of universal access and the use of information and communication technologies, at an institutional level and for communication between teaching staff and students. In spite of this, the real impact of specific use of the Internet on teaching and learning processes is proving to be more difficult and complex due to differing perceptions not only between generations but also educationally, between students and teachers.

At present we can verify that the digital divide, as understood until today, has been narrowed considerably. And yet, as a consequence of this increased access to the Web, others have opened up, other kinds of social divide which, in some ways, are much more troublesome than the initial gap. We are dealing with divides caused by the varying levels of benefit obtained from the potential of the Web, whether for personal and social activities or for learning purposes.

It is clear that the Internet is becoming more and more consolidated and that it is establishing itself as a major arena for the development of new kinds of social relations with most of us taking our first steps online as simple observers. Search engines have contributed to the general conception of the Internet as an immense repository of information where we can find exactly what we are looking for, while the reality is that we are only finding what others have decided we should find. Today the Internet gives much more than a screen displaying an email inbox or a search engine. Today the Web is a place for exchange, for the creation of shared knowledge, social relations, for reaching personal, economic, social and educational goals, etc. But it is not the evident transforming potential that should worry us, but our capacity to understand and use it. There is, therefore, a new digital divide between those who have a specific idea and use of the Internet and those who do not. And the trend is for this divide to widen between certain social groups and generations. What is clear is that the conceptual divide in the use of the Internet determines the benefits obtained and the capacity of individuals and groups to grow and have an effect on society.

There already exists a divide between those people who routinely use the Web in a generalised way (from reading newspapers to participating in social networks or buying cinema tickets) and those who hardly ever use it, despite having access to it. We are however interested in revealing the clear inequality in opportunities among those people – and institutions – who have understood the Web's potential for transformation and those who have not.

This divide has other consequences that we are beginning to see in various areas of our society today. Clear demonstrations of this are the use of social networks in politics (Obama's election campaign for instance), business (such as reviews of hotels and travel destinations written by users online) and at universities (the boom in online systems at traditional universities.

In the field of education, at universities, the divide is not just a generational one between teachers and students. In our view, the main digital divide lies in their different conceptions of Internet use. Teachers and students alike are active users but their mental constructs and their objectives are quite different. Internet access is now widespread at universities but mere access has not, as yet, transformed the university itself or its teaching and learning model.

There is, for example, a digital divide between higher education institutions which consider the role of the Internet as that of setting up knowledge networks and linked or online universities, and those which still question this possibility and cling to their own territory and the knowledge of the teaching staff on their payroll. There is a divide between those lecturers who take advantage of the Web in the design of their courses, creating a learning continuum that goes beyond the virtual classroom and those who consider the Internet a place to put course material or a proxy for tutorials in their offices. Digital divides also exist between universities as some of them consider internationalisation a mere expression of the physical attraction of foreign students and teachers, leaving aside the potential of the Internet and social networks for globalisation rather than internationalisation, which goes beyond the attraction of talent as it has the power to generate nodes of knowledge that can not be fixed on space or time coordinates.

Reports such as the one drawn up by the US Department of Education back the effectiveness and efficiency of online and blended courses compared to the traditional classroom. The argument is straightforward: maximum advantage is taken of the educational potential of connectivity, of the asynchronous relationship between students and teachers. The constant educational continuum in blended systems is further evidence for this and has obvious benefits for academic performance. The more time spent debating, collaborating, sharing knowledge and learning, the better the results.

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