

Chapter VII

Access and Accessibility in E-Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers some of the major questions around access and accessibility, beginning with the most basic: just what is meant by access and how this relates to the notion of accessibility since the assumption is so frequently made that we all know so much what access and accessibility are that few writers ever bother to define them or even to set under which terms of reference they understand the words. In this respect, as we shall show, there are parallels between the e-learning access debates and issues and those surrounding access to other forms of education, in particular, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines some of the major issues and debates surrounding access and accessibility in e-learning in a primarily British context with references to other countries such as Ireland and Australia, among others. However, it is worth noting that the key issues and debates under examination to a great extent transcend national divides since without direct access there is no e-learning. This brings us to an important point

in relation to the three key factors that impede access in terms of disability: failure to adjust to the needs of all learners (an impediment that the idea of universal design aims to remedy, which we discuss in this chapter), stereotypical assumptions and preconceptions of peers and teachers, and above all, the fact that with e-learning all learners can become temporarily disabled in terms of hardware and software.

Nonetheless, it is beyond dispute that the creation of information technology has been

a revolution in all our lives and its impact is inescapable: “Without question, the creation of the personal computer has been the single most important technological advance for blind people’s communication”¹ (White, 2006).

With the passing of laws concerning physical access and disability discrimination across much of the industrialised world, issues of access and accessibility in all their senses are very much to the fore these days. We are well used to Web sites offering text-only alternatives and to seeing logos such as Bobby that indicate the attainment by the site of certain standards of accessibility in terms of user friendliness for those with visual impairments and, sometimes, dyslexia. Ironically, visual impairment only represents the most visible aspect of the debates over access and accessibility to the Web in general and to e-learning in particular. It also represents an aspect whose problems and issues are readily ignored or, perhaps worse, are seen as already solved.

BACKGROUND

Before considering the concepts of access and accessibility in e-learning, we examine these issues in relation to higher education because issues derived from these concepts have a great deal of similarities.

The Concepts of Access and Accessibility in Higher Education

Broadly speaking, *access*, *accessibility*, and *widening participation* belong to a relatively recent educational policy discourse that has now become a major policy issue in postschool education in the British context (Dearing, 1997; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2004; Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2005; Metcalf, 1997; Robbins, 1963; Scottish Executive, 2004) and worldwide (Davies, 1995; Halsey, 1992; Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998; Skilbeck & Connell,

2000). The expansion of higher education has led to a greater openness on the part of many institutions of higher education to mature, part-time, and other nontraditional students. The expansion has also led to a significant improvement in relative participation rates for women, mostly minority ethnic groups and mature students (Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals [CVCP], 1998). The exact position of social class is more difficult to pin down because of shortcomings in data availability and a lack of a systematic approach in how the data are analysed (Davies, 1994, 1995). However, over the past 40 years, the ratios of relative participation from lower social groups have remained fairly constant, and higher education still counts a disproportionate number of students from professional and managerial backgrounds who remain greatly overrepresented while students from skilled manual, semiskilled, and unskilled backgrounds remain underrepresented (CVCP; Dearing; DfES; HEFCE; Robbins; Scottish Executive; Scottish Higher Education Funding Council [SHEFC], 2004). Young and mature people from skilled manual, semiskilled, and unskilled backgrounds are not only less likely to be qualified to enter higher education, but also less likely to apply if qualified and less likely to be accepted if they apply, as well as being less likely to enter higher education if they are offered a place (Metcalf; Osborne, 1999). Skilled manual, semiskilled, or unskilled people form about half the economically active population of the United Kingdom and only about a quarter of young entrants to higher education are from these groups (Office of Population and Census Survey [OPCS], 1993). The rise in the number of 16- to 19-year-olds not involved in any form of education and training is matched by a growth in their economic activity both in low-skill full-time and part-time work (Hodgson & Spours, 2000; Metcalf, 2003), especially among lower socioeconomic groups, and this has prompted the British government to aim for 50% of young people entering higher education by 2010² (DfES).

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