Unpacking Transnational Policy: Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide

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Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide is a text produced by, and apparently primarily intended for, educational policy makers on national and international levels. Its genesis is located in the Fifth NCAL/OECD Roundtable entitled The Lifelong Learning and New Technologies Gap: Reaching the Disadvantaged, held at the U.S. National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL), University of Pennsylvania, 8-10 December 1999. The roundtable brought together educators and policy makers from around the world to share experiences and strategies for tackling the growing gulf of experience, access, and learning among have and have-nots in the realm of digital information technologies.

As a record of the roundtable, Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide succeeds in providing both specific papers and chapters synthesizing various themes that highlight both perspectives and potential solutions. The nine chapters focus on different aspects of the problem. While not attempting to be compendious, the editors appear to be setting a policy agenda, articulating key directions for encountering the problems, and presenting some best practice examples of how the issues can be taken up. The key themes that Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide address include: the nature of inequalities, national versus international divisions, formal and non-formal learning environments, challenges of adult learners, issues relating to first languages, and examples of work going on in Sweden, Finland, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

I think that Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide is an important book for the rest of us, and has a place in the boardroom, classroom, study and desktop. On first encountering this book, the average educator, academic, or person working in the field may perhaps be led to dismiss the text as pap for policy makers, and an opportunity for some nations to showcase their programs. There is some evidence that sections of the book may be out of touch with what goes on in the field(s), but the importance of this book to me, and I think to other readers, is that it shows clearly that national and international policy makers really do understand what the problems are, and though I may challenge some of the approaches and potential solutions, much of what is presented is trying to conceptualize the problems in a way that can work towards meaningful solutions.

The editors of Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide realize that the divide is not technologically driven, nor will it be bridged with technology driven solutions. The divide is caused by a chronic lack of access to basic resources that is merely exacerbated by technology. We can all imagine that it is hard to develop a digital infrastructure in countries and regions where telecom systems do not exist outside of major population centers; where electricity is not stable; where government policy does not privilege technology in its agenda for governance. And many of us still think that this is the main problem. Not so. In this book, authors continually point to a digital divide within G8 and other developed nations. Usually in economically disadvantaged regions or rural locations, the digital divide occurs even when a government thinks provides stable electricity and telephony and touts a great digital dream for its population.

The strength of Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide is that it clearly places focus on the fact that the divide has its roots in much more mundane soil than fiber optics and advanced processors. First and foremost, the problem is one of social inequities: basic literacy, basic healthcare, basic living conditions, access to education, equitable status for women, and democratic governance must all be addressed before any meaningful strides can be made.
towards bridging the gap, technological or social. And that is perhaps the point of this book. To highlight that there really is no digital divide per se, but rather there is a social divide that manifests itself most obviously when governments try to implement information technology policy. This is not the only meaningful thrust of the book. The focus that some chapters place on learning environments, the conceptualization of the role of the educator and teacher training also focus attention on the importance of applying resources to non-technical aspects of the digital divide. In all contexts, overlooking the role of the educator, in both formal and non-formal learning environments, leads to the education of a populace ill-equipped to take on active roles in the construction of their own sense of meaning online, and production of content in the digital information world; relegating them to passive consumerist roles on the have-not side of the divide. Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide is not fully successful in figuring out what the purpose of bridging the divide may be. While they make remarkable statements about the importance of not only an Internet that is polylingual, but that communications technology should function in indigenous languages, they leave some telling holes. They fail to articulate an indigenous value for digital communications technology. Nothing in the book speaks to the dominance of Western corporate agendas for technology development and implementation. As well, nothing is said about appropriate technology, to move E. F. Schumacher's term and thinking into the digital age. The digital divide is not a technology driven problem. And the authors wisely do not look too often for technology driven solutions. Rather, they primarily focus attention on the social and cultural aspects of communication and community. Some chapters do showcase best practices but, with the exception of the Swedish example, they do so largely at the cost of ignoring those who fall through the cracks. And those who fall through the cracks are primarily those for whom the corporate agenda cannot fit within a profit or charity framework. And this is a failing in an otherwise important book. Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide is so completely immersed in a market economy paradigm that it fails to recognize that there can be any other agenda but wiring a world for greater global competition and accesses to resources. It fundamentally looks to communications technology as it benefits OECD members, and therefore misses the greater opportunity for describing a role for communications technology that takes as its goal the use of technology for encouraging and promoting, not a hegemonic Western notions of technology, but a local, bio-regional, and culturally specific indigenous role for bridging digital divides.

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