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E-Learning and Access: Some European/Irish Issues and Implications

The history and development of educational practice and provision in Europe and the promotion of access opportunities with/for low/non-participating adult groups involves the complex interplay of a set of socio-personal, cultural, political, ideological, economic, psycho-philosophical, and technological factors which have shaped the present systems, participating levels and provision. In a real personal sense one had a distinct feeling of déjà vu the more one reflected and read in the preparation of this presentation. Involvement in the broad field of 3rd level educational provision for non-traditional adult learners from low/non-participating groups had revealed the complexity of the access agenda. In this regard concepts and issues in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT)/e-learning access debate such as ‘social exclusion/inclusion’, ‘digital divide’, ‘motivational orientations’, ‘literarcy/computeracy’, ‘community relevance, interests and aspirations’, ‘socio-personal capital’, ‘learning partnerships’ ‘community informatics’, ‘differentiated participation patterns’, ‘holistic solutions’ and many others all resonated with this presenter as a consequence of his role in access provision for excluded adult groups. There is not an easy, “one size fits all” solution to the challenging realities of non/low participation in learning.

In many Western industrialised nations ICT is regarded as an important factor in government policy development and practical approaches, through/by which social divides/exclusion/non/low adult participation levels in education/lifelong learning are challenged. A salient element in the contemporary literature and debate is the range of positions and perspectives adopted. Access and ICT/e-learning is perhaps best located in the broader socio - political – personal - cultural – educational - economic arena. ‘Social exclusion’ has, as a concept of understanding, a reasonably long pedigree in European social theory, policy and practice. ‘Social inclusion’, however is a relatively new term and describes a positive, proactive process of grappling with social exclusion and promoting/integrating excluded/disaffiliated/disadvantaged individuals and groups into mainstream society. The increasingly wide usage of the term ‘social inclusion’ and a plethora of policies, schemes and projects, within the EU and in individual countries, to promote the concept have led to a range of diverse meanings/definitions/approaches. For example, the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion (2002) of the U.K. Government defines ‘social inclusion’ as:

“the process by which efforts are made to ensure that everyone, regardless of their experiences and circumstances, can achieve their potential in life. To achieve inclusion, income and employment are necessary but not sufficient. An inclusive society is also characterised by a striving for reduced inequality, a balance between individuals’ rights and duties and increased social cohesion.”

The European Social Fund concludes that ‘social inclusion’ is:

“the development of capacity and opportunity to play a full role, not only in economic terms but also in social, psychological and political terms”.

A number of important European projects and frameworks, especially community-based initiatives, such as the Leonardo da Vince scheme, have sought to examine/identify/promote the fundamental role(s) that ICTs can play in the efforts to combat social exclusion/promote social inclusion. Key elements in an effective approach/campaign include inclusiveness in the development of holistic policies, and projects, symbiotic partnerships in system/programme delivery, and an acceptance of individual/community empowerment.

In the context of access issues and ICT’s/E-learning, an awareness/understanding of the broader macro-context is vitally important. What does appear clear from extensive international research is that ‘social exclusion’ is caused by a number of interlocking factors that limit people’s access to main systems (including education) and effectively exclude them from participation in mainstream society. These factors include:

- ~~///~~ long-term dependence on low/inadequate income;
- ~~///~~ long-term unemployment;
- ~~///~~ low quality employment or absence of employment record;
- ~~///~~ low level of education and/or illiteracy;
- ~~///~~ growing up in a vulnerable/dysfunctional family;
- ~~///~~ disability;
- ~~///~~ poor health;
- ~~///~~ living in an area of multiple disadvantage;
- ~~///~~ precarious housing conditions and homelessness;
- ~~///~~ immigration, ethnicity, racism and discrimination.

Interestingly, many of these categories feature in research analyses/results in Ireland, U.K. and other European countries on non/low level participation in traditional/ICT/e-learning systems. Indeed one strong, cautionary point is outlined by one English researcher who claims that:

“social exclusion must be recognised as a long standing social problem which exists, and existed, irrespective of the development of ICTs”

Phipps (2000)

Research for this presentation emphasised the manner in which a plethora of socio-economic and personal/cultural/political factors affect/effect differential patterns of ICT access and use.

This presentation today intentionally seeks to focus on ICT/e-learning access issues for the above groups.

The almost cliché term ‘digital divide’ has emerged as a much debated/analysed topic and representative of widely divergent views/solutions and manifestations from the rather narrowly constructed binary divide of access/non-access to computers, to other positions embracing levels/types of access, actual use/utilisation of e-services, personal/functional ICT values, training needs analyses, community content issues, community/individual orientations, socio-cultural norms, and the relative value/contributions of ICT to a broader lifelong learning agenda in society. Di Maggio and Hargittai (2001) point to at least five manifestations of ‘digital inequality’, viz, equipment, location of access, autonomy of use, technical skills, social support, and purposes for using ICTs. The ‘digital divide’ is not a homogenous concept, reality, or process. National, local, group and culture-specific differences indicate significant diversity.

Interestingly, recent research in Wales, Australia and other systems point out that “supply-side policy solutions may not be sufficient to bridge the ‘digital divide’. Improved infrastructure may enhance the quality of services in regional areas but may not overcome the disparities in access/use rates for different social groups. One Australian study concluded that “even in metropolitan areas where infrastructure is well developed, Internet take-up rates for certain social groups – low income learners, the unemployed, early school leavers, the elderly – have been low. A more complex social policy agenda, directly targeting digitally disadvantaged/excluded communities and families, is necessary if Australia is to seriously address the root causes of the digital divide” (Lloyd and Hellwig, 2000, p.34). This report further pointed out that a large proportion of the Australian population did not participate in the growing knowledge economy – not because of where they live **per se**, - but as a consequence of socio-economic and psycho-personal circumstances. The most important determinant, for example, of internet access in Australia was educational qualification level, followed by income. After accounting for other factors, region and location of residence by themselves did not explain differential Internet take-up rates” (Lloyd and Hellwig, 2000, p.41).

Substantial comparative data exist which highlight significant world wide disparities in ICT use/access within different socio-economic and ethno-personal groups. Recent U.S. data in National Telecommunications and Information Administration Reports (NTIA, 1999, 2000, 2003), indicate major growth in access to computers and Internet use for all socio-demographic groups and locations. However, significant disparities were evident across different groups, for example:

- ✍ high income earners make significantly more use of Internet services than do low income earners;
- ✍ White Americans/citizens from Asian/Pacific backgrounds use the Internet significantly more than do African/and Hispanic Americans (NTIA, 2003).

In global contexts the nature of the 'digital divide' is very pronounced with World Economic Forum (2002) data highlighting the fact that just 10% of the world's population had Internet access in 2002 and nearly 90% of these users resided in 1st world industrialised countries. Significant "gender divides" have been discerned in Germany and Italy and a substantial 'age divide' was evident in regard to ICT access and use in South Korea (Chen and Wellman, 2003, p.1).

A significant study in the UK by the British ICT regulator, OFTEL (2000), found "that Internet usage was still predominant amongst the higher social groups, younger age cohorts, larger households with children while consumers over 55 years of age and the lower social groups were considerably less likely to use the Internet at home or in a work setting" (p. 39). A study by The National Organisation for Adult Learning (2001) (NIACE) in the U.K. concluded that people with access to the Internet were twice as likely to be part of learning groups/activities than those without Internet access and that use of the Internet, while generally increasing in the broader society, was still relatively low among females, lower socio-economic categories D and E, persons over 55 years of age, lone parents, persons living in disadvantages community areas, early school leavers, people with basic skills difficulties and disabled persons. Interestingly, research by Gorard, Selwyn, Williams and others in Wales (1999a, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b) has tended to confirm that ICT has failed to provide a means of overcoming existing barriers to participation, particularly barriers of "time, space and pace". (Esson and Thomon, 1999). In fact it is argued that, to a large extent, inequalities of access to ICT reinforce, rather than ameliorate, existing barriers to participation. (Williams, Gorard, Selwyn, 2000). It is claimed that:

"the role of technology in widening participation in adult lifelong learning remains largely untested. Many in government and even in education, distracted perhaps by the allure of the technology concerned, may have tended to treat these new media as relatively unproblematic in

their impact It is suggested that the application of technological fixes to underlying socio-economic determinants may solve some problems but create others, and leave the majority unaffected.

(Gorard and Selwyn, 1999, p.2)

Similar patterns of differential ICT attitudes and use were evidenced in recent research data in Ireland.

The salience of some of these findings and observations relating to ICT access and participation was confirmed in a recently published major international report by the Global Consumer Advisory Board (GCAB) (2003) **Charting and Bridging Digital Divides**, which is perhaps, “the first to systematically compare and synthesize research on the digital divide over time and in a global range of developed and developing countries” (p.3). The authors, Chen and Wellman, examine patterns of Internet/ICT access and use in eight countries and focus on issues such as:

- ✍ Access groups/levels in terms of socio-economic status, gender, life stage and geographic location.
- ✍ Where/for how long/for what purposes do users use computers and the Internet?

They developed an integrative framework of analysis to examine the digital divide from four perspectives, viz, Technological Access, Technological Literacy, Social Access and Social Use. Table 1 indicates the breadth of the variables. The researcher endorses the views of Wilson (2000) and others regarding the existence of multiple divides beyond the physical issue of access, to a continuum of factors including cognitive access, content issues, financial access and political access. Also, they argued that the term digital divide had both technological and social resonances and that “by taking a comparative approach, we have been able to gauge the complex state of the digital divide more holistically” (Chan and Wellman, 2003, p.2).

See Table 1

This fascinatingly informative and challenging report “clearly suggests that the uneven diffusion and use of the Internet are shaped by – and are shaping – social inequalities” (Chen and Wellman, 2003, p. 24). They identified some key manifestations of the multifaceted nature of the digital divide, including:

- ✍ Fundamentally, the divide is about the gap between individuals and societies that have the resources to participate in the information era and those that do not.
- ✍ Digital divides occur at the intersection of international and intranational socio-economic, technological and linguistic differences.
- ✍ The diffusion of Internet use in developed countries may be stalling rather than moving on to triumphant ubiquity.
- ✍ The digital divide remains substantial between developed and developing countries.
- ✍ The digital divide is widening and deepening in developing countries.
- ✍ The digital divide has profound impacts on the continuation of social inequality.
- ✍ The digital divide is not solely contingent on people's demographic characteristics or skills. Economic, institutional, political and socio-cultural factors significantly affect ICT access and use.

The lines of research and policy questions raised by the authors are, I believe, vitally important, to the theme of this presentation. They include:

- ✍ How does the Internet help individuals to enhance social, cultural and human capital, within and between nations?
- ✍ How does the Internet facilitate local and global community building?
- ✍ Under what circumstances could disadvantaged individuals and groups reap digital dividends from the Internet, especially women, minorities, elderly and those in less-developed countries?
- ✍ In what ways do people benefit from ICT use, and conversely, are excluded by not being able to use the media?
- ✍ What are the leverage points for the cost-effective narrowing of the digital divide? (Chen and Wellman, 2003, pp. 29-30).

These findings and data from divergent systems also indicate that existing differential participation patterns may be reinforced through ICTs/e-learning, as higher social groups, "educated" individuals, affluent communities, well-resourced school environments etc., who make most use of technology, are also (often) those most likely to participate in ICT/e-learning. Research by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), (2001) indicates that ICTs, different delivery structures and systems, learning content, "blended" methodologies, etc., operate as positive, intervening factors when their use is integrated and developmental rather than purely instrumental/work related. COL (2001) emphasised "the need for socio-technical solutions – a combination of social and technical innovation" (p.27).

Major recent research on the contribution of ICTs to the Social Inclusion agenda in Europe (Lambrakis Research Foundation, 2003) established, as a key

finding, that technology **per se** could/should be used as a tool to integrate learning, socio-personal development with community empowerment in order to achieve maximum social, personal, and economic benefits. Studies on the Leonarda da Vinci framework (EU sponsored ICT projects) to “promote social cohesion, prevent exclusion of disadvantaged groups, provide equal opportunities for women etc.” concluded that some key aspects of ICTs, learning delivery systems, curriculum content, intervention strategies, etc. which had been shown to promote social inclusion/access were:

- ✍ availability of equipment to centres/individuals that needed financial support;
- ✍ use of “first rung” learning opportunities and “bite sized chunks” of learning to make ICT learning more accessible, manageable, more positively motivating and less threatening;
- ✍ use of a wide range of technologies;
- ✍ careful inclusive planning, including liaising with community leaders/individual learners/voluntary groups;
- ✍ effective use of available human resources in contacting/teaching/learning situations;
- ✍ structured, gradualistic, negotiated approaches to learning;
- ✍ use of assertive technology for learners with disabilities;
- ✍ need for broad-based flexible communication networks (Lambrakis Research Foundation, 2003, pp. 5 – 7).

Some of these findings, were similar to aspects of a more traditional access project in which this presenter has been involved in Ireland over the past 13 years.

Technological development may not automatically, lead to broadly-based socially inclusive lifelong e-learning, nor indeed does it guarantee that e-learning/ICT will always be used in these ways. Without a clear, socially-based rationale, and set of guiding principles the promise may/will lead to a widening gap in access between different groups. The powerful potential is evident in the Morino Institute (2001) statement that technology can help” achieve meaningful and tangible improvements in the standard of living of families who are now struggling to rise from the bottom rungs of our economy. We can help people achieve more than technological literacy.”

Interestingly, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 in the U.S.A. was intended to ensure that opening markets to competition would prevent abuse of infrastructure bottlenecks and monopoly powers and would develop broad-based competition. However, a major review by the prestigious Consumers’ Union

(2000), concluded in its Report **Disconnected, Disadvantaged and Disenfranchised (1999)**, that:

- ✍ while computer ownership and internet use continue to grow, the “digital divide” persists and is not likely to disappear any time soon.
- ✍ by presenting the first direct comparison of a broad range of commercial, informational, educational, civic and political activities of individuals in physical space to those in cyberspace, we have demonstrated a troubling, new source of inequality in our society.
- ✍ the persisting digital divide puts millions of Americans at an economic, social and political disadvantage.
- ✍ people of every age, income and race are concerned that technological advances are widening the gap between rich and poor and fear that the information revolution will leave many behind.

(pp. 1 – 2)

The power, promise, and direction of this learning revolution must be examined and questioned so that, as one writer cautions, “we are not over-run by a juggernaut of technological determinism”. Sir John Daniels, formerly of the Open University, distinguished between “hard technologies” of bits and bytes, electrons and pixels, satellites and search engines, and “soft technologies” of reflective processes, principles, approaches, methods, sets of guidelines and rules, and models of organization. Daniels captured the startling pace of change and the need to broaden our understandings and be guided by thought and professional reflection in access provision when he asserted that:

“we must concentrate on getting the soft technologies right. The hard technologies change. Indeed, they change quite rapidly. Some years ago video-conferencing was all the rage. Now to hear some people talk, you would think the Web is the only learning medium that exists. In a few years the pattern of technologies available and fashions in media use will have changed again. To cope with these changes you need a sound framework of soft technologies to ensure you employ the hard technologies effectively. These soft technologies are simply the working principles and practices that underpin the rest of today’s modern industrial and service economy: teamwork, division of labour, specialization, quality service, project management, creative thinking and problem solving... if we get the soft technologies right the hard technologies will take care of themselves.”

(Daniels, 1999)

Interestingly, and apropos the US report, Professor Mark Warschauer (2003) in his recent text **Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide**, points to a major national effort in my own country, Ireland, to promote/embed technology and to improve lives through ICT which had “unexpected difficulties that hindered the results”. (p.4). Essentially, Warschauer points up the view that the notions of a ‘digital divide’ and its logical implications – that socio – personal – educational problems and inequities can be addressed through technological provision, connectivity, services etc. – are increasingly problematic. He cites a number of comparative research vignettes from different ethnic contexts to illustrate his assertion. Warschauer (2003) claims that having access to ICTs, and possessing the ability to use them effectively, are two different issues (p.6).

In 2000, research indicated that the winning town Ennis, which had received €25 million had little to show for its money. Advanced technology had been thrust into people’s hands with little preparation. Training programs had been run, but they were not sufficiently accompanied by awareness programs as to why people should use the new technology in the first place. In some instances, well-functioning social systems were disrupted in order to make way for showcase technology. The social embeddedness of the project lacked depth. In the end, according to one researcher “the three runners-up – which each received only 1/15 of the money that Ennis received – actually had more to show for their efforts to promote social inclusion through technology than did the winner”. Some important lessons were learned from this project, which are of particular relevance to the ICT access issues/debate. These included:

- ☞ acceptance that a partnership process is central;
- ☞ ICT is most successful when built on to existing organisational, community and social contexts;
- ☞ ICT interest and use increase in response to human contact, explanation and demonstration of the real, practical benefits and enjoyment of ICT;
- ☞ awareness of, and access to, ICTs do not guarantee meaningful use or benefit;
- ☞ community resources and informal support networks of people helping each other greatly assisted acceptance and use;
- ☞ community champions and role models are important;
- ☞ the emphasis on community technology was key;
- ☞ best equipment, technical support and PR assistance was provided for community and voluntary groups.

(McQuillan, 2002, p.4)

In some respects the latin term “**festina lente**” – “hasten slowly”, - has a special significance in the context of this “technological” solution. The socio-cultural fabric of society, individual/community aspirations, life experiences and educational expectations, individual/community ‘self-talk’ and locus of control, engagement and partnership dynamics fused with an open communications style, form just part of the important set of variables in the ICT/e-learning access process. In the access process quick “hard technologies” may deal with certain issues but the socio-personal “soft technologies/skills” must feature centrally in targeted, holistic and coherent projects to deal with the extensive range of factors and variables. It would seem that different ‘digital divides’ exist on a comparative basis and that an understanding of the various socio-economic barriers to ICT participation is vital.

The next part of this presentation is intended to focus on a recent/on-going Irish Adult Education Access project and to examine the rationale, characteristics, operating climate, and learned lessons of developing learning partnerships with/for socially excluded, low/non-participating groups. I hope to delineate salient aspects of this educational engagement which may be of value to the ICT access debate.

In a real sense the qualitative research associated with this venture in Cork indicated the vital importance of learning partnerships and social engagement in access promotion and provision. In the access process, understanding, sharing, reflecting, empathising, trust building, negotiating learning, active listening, and cooperative planning are just some of the key activities and responses which are central to the ultimate outcome of the project. Many of the findings from this earlier access initiative are similar to findings in more detailed recent qualitative and qualitative research projects on ICTs/e-learning and access conducted by Gorard (2000), Selwyn, and others in Wales, Keeble (2003), Phipps (2003) on Community Informatics in England, O’Donnell (2001) on the role of voluntary organisations and the promotion of an inclusive information society in Europe, and contributions from BECTA, (2001), (British Educational Communications and Technology Agency).

In 1992, the Cork Northside Education Initiative was established in response to calls for a project, which would specifically target the educational needs of the north side of Cork City where many of its residents were experiencing ‘social exclusion’, a concept which embraced the dynamics of poverty and disadvantage.

The Third EU Poverty Programme in Ireland, Combating Exclusion (1994) defined social exclusion as:

"the structures and processes, which exclude persons and groups from their full participation in society. It explains that poverty does not just happen: it flows directly from the economic policies and the choices which society makes about how resources are used and who has access to them.... Social exclusion may take a combination of forms- economic, social, cultural, legal - with multiple effects. The term exclusion has connotations of process, focusing on the forces by which particular categories of people are closed off from the rights, benefits and opportunities of modern society. Social exclusion is not just about lack of money, but may be about isolation, lack of work, lack of educational opportunities, even discrimination" (pp.3-4)

This community initiative clearly showed the value and importance that must be attached to the building of 'capital' – cultural, social, economic, personal – as a vital element in individual/community regeneration, the access process and educational reform. In the present context of the ICT/e-learning access debate the concept of 'capital' has as much, if not more, validity, especially 'social capital'. Recent debates on the role of the Internet and its impact on social inclusion/exclusion have led to a continuum of diverse points and philosophical camps. (Timms, Ferlander, and Timms, 2001) (Breza, 1998; DOT Force, 2001; Castells, 1998; Shearman, 2000). "Technological Utopians" (transformationalists) argue that ICT/e-learning provides "the basis for new forms of social inclusion, enabling people to participate in society regardless of temporal, spatial and other physical restraints" (p. 118). From this position, ICT expansion, especially the Internet, facilitates/promotes a rise in social capital "i.e. connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them". (Putnam, 2000, p.19). However, others would contend as "Technological dystopians" (sceptics) do, that the "application of ICTs to an ever widening range of social, cultural and economic activities (e-commerce, e-learning etc.), is providing yet more dimensions for social exclusion. "To lack access, for whatever reason, is to be excluded from the burgeoning knowledge society" (Timms, Ferlander, and Timms, 2001, p. 118), (Karim, 2001; Phipps, 2000; Gorard and Selwyn, 200, Selwyn, 1999). The crucial importance of socio-cultural, psycho-personal, barriers to participation by adults in traditional learning is evident in the extensive research by Veronica McGivney, (2001a, 2001b, 2000, 1999a, 1999b) and others who argue that, in the access process, "many institutional strategies to widen participation have been designed to remove the practical obstacles. Other personal barriers, such as attitudes, perceptions, expectations educational self-concept Social class, are particularly resilient and difficult to change". (McGivney, 2001a, pp. 70 – 71). Gorard (2000b) has identified the importance of long-term, socio-economic-cultural background characteristics in the access

process especially the role/effect of families” in creating a learner identity which does not view current opportunities as appropriate, interesting or useful”, (p.189). In some respects, in the broad area of educational access and perhaps more particularly in relation to ICT/-e-learning and access; a form of socio-personal-cultural affective filter operates as a membrane through which technological devices, economic-instrumental arguments, and lifelong learning learning rationales, may not (can not) permeate.

It is in the context of this affective filter that this Irish learning partnership process was undertaken and motivated by social equity and educational inclusion. In some respects, the concept "partnership" has, or may, become an educational cliché, an almost dubious euphemism to include any association or relationship, however tenuous, between a provider and a community of learners. Educational partnership, in the Cork Northside Initiative context, was animated by:

- ~~///~~ **a two-way process of open communication** (much emphasis on interpersonal communication);
- ~~///~~ **a shared unity of purpose** (broader socio-educational rationale);
- ~~///~~ **high trust and mutual respect** (equality of roles, contributions and partners);
- ~~///~~ **willingness to negotiate** (“win-win basis”);
- ~~///~~ **sharing of information, decision-making and responsibility** (emphasis on the first person plural “we” nature of the project);
- ~~///~~ **community and individual empowerment process** (dualism in approach);
- ~~///~~ **delineation, design and content production related to teacher/learner/ community influence.**

Essentially, we sought to develop a symbiotic relationship, i.e. a mutually beneficial partnership between organisms of different kinds; between an educational institution/provider and adults in significantly disadvantaged areas.

These seven animating principles inspired the initiative and formed a firm platform and secure foundations for developments to the present day. I would argue that they are as relevant/legitimate/important today in the cyber world of asynchronous learning networks, “blended learning” programmes etc. Many of these issues have featured in a wide range of community ICT/e-learning projects in Ireland, Wales, England, other settings.

It was decided to embark on an open process of consultation, negotiation, listening and research with Northside communities as a way of finalising proposals for an actual intervention.

‘Cultural strangers’ can be taken to refer to persons who experience a sense of dissonance, incomprehension, lack of integration or alienation in relation to the cultural space in which they find themselves. In the context of the present presentation, the use is much more selective and may refer to the process within which ICT actors engaging in learning partnership may come from and represent such widely divergent and different educational traditions, cyberskill levels, formal qualifications, experiences and expectations, affective responses to learning and community involvement, so as to be ‘cultural strangers’. In some respect, ICT/e-learning providers; replete with technical hardware, powerful software and asynchronous methods, may be regarded as "non-native" educational personnel or actors by representatives of the "native" disadvantaged and excluded indigenous communities and groupings.

A further challenge for ICT/e-learning providers in the access process may be in bringing about a paradigm shift, which may be necessary to accommodate and legitimate different aspects of empowerment development programmes at the community level. Professor Chris Duke (1992) in *The Learning University: Towards a New Paradigm?* confronts this issue when he asks:

"Is it helpful to speak of a new paradigm of learning - a new way of seeing and understanding? Has a new idea of emerged from the chrysalis of the old, needing but a name for recognition? Do prevailing old assumptions obscure new practices? Does naming alter the reality - for there may be much in a name? It has been said that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet - but changing the terms, fostering new discourse, acknowledging a new paradigm, can in themselves assist a shift of vales and assumptions which makes new practices more than superficial. Conversely, is playing with new words a form of protectionism - gestures of change to mask an abiding dominant reality?"

Interestingly, although ICT models of learning are receiving significant socio-political support worldwide in adult lifelong learning systems, some writers, such as Campbell (2000), Braidotti (2000), Conada and Brusca (1991), Liao (1999), and others contend that “instructional design practices have up to now, been rooted in a domain constructed, and reflecting, androcentric values” (Campbell, 2000, p.131). Braidotti, (2000), in **Cyberfeminism with a Difference**, claims that “the alleged triumph of high technologies is not matched by a leap of the human imagination to create new images and representations. Quite the contrary whats noticeable is the repetition of very old themes and clichés, under the appearance of ‘new’ technological advances” (p.6).

Participation and community engagement emerged as essential elements in the Northside access process, and as one observer noted "*people will not commit their own community resources, i.e., labour, energy, information, social relationships, enthusiasm, commitment, if they do not have the impression that the community education activity to which they are contributing is, to a considerable extent, theirs, i.e., controlled and owned by them*". This sense of socio-personal ownership/engagement may, in turn, be intimately linked to the eventual sustainability (or collapse) of the educational effort at the community level. This project showed the value/need of nuanced understanding and community action in tackling educational exclusion.

Perhaps the most important resource; community-based knowledge, content and information; may not be forthcoming in a consistent, integrated manner if the joint effort is not built on the basic premise that "people" too are professionals "(experts)" and on some fundamental comprehension and working knowledge of cross-cultural communication strategies and empathic understanding. Significantly, major European research on ICTs and social inclusion established that "people need not just the hardware and software, but the reasons, motivations, attitudes and skills to use them". (Lambrakis Research Foundations, 2003, p.12). A key research finding was that "whether focused on technology, content, delivery, pedagogy, social context or supports, that ICT should be inclusive, active and interactive in development, organisation, delivery and evaluation i.e. technology as a tool or an element in a system, not as an end in itself", (Lambrakis Research Foundation, 2003, p.18).

As in the access approach in Cork a holistic, integrated, targeted, participative, and inclusive approach was endorsed in relation to ICT/e-learning, access provision, and social inclusion in Europe.

In access provision we are adverting to radical socio-cultural and educational changes. This change and challenge is not simply at the administrative, technical and organisational level for providers, but is at the very heart of the educational enterprise, namely, Who defines knowledge? Who owns knowledge? Who decides what is knowledge and what is new knowledge?

In the access promotion/process Irish, UK and other European projects and research analyses have identified the importance of staged development as part of a broader strategic plan. In the ICT/e-learning access debate this approach may have positive contributions to make to the acceptance, use and social embedding of this system of learning.

The model in Cork that we have found to be valuable, and one that I would wish to share, is the staged partnership model, which includes the following five integral elements.

- ✂✂ **Targeting**
- ✂✂ **Contact and communication**
- ✂✂ **Consultation and negotiation**
- ✂✂ **Programme development**
- ✂✂ **Programme implementation**

Stage I: Targeting: Special targeting is essential if access opportunities are to be extended to under-represented/deprived/excluded sectors, who may experience a significant ‘cultural divide’ between their norms, values and educational expectations and those reflected in the formal learning systems.

Stage II: Contact and Communication: To attract non-participant adults requires addressing, at first contact stage, by listening and sharing, some of the ingrained attitudes and perceptions engendered by factors such as socio-economic background, community circumstances, personal disabilities, lack of confidence and self-esteem, and lack of trust in the system.

A primary role in outreach activity in access provision is to establish networks, liase with other agencies and initiate or extend links between the educational providers and Community Organisations and/or activists. Major research on over 700 UK Government funded community-oriented ICT centres in deprived rural and inner-city areas noted the importance of the level/style/tone of ‘engagement’ with a broad range of stakeholders in the ultimate success or otherwise of projects. Shearman (1999), in a major report entitled, **Local Connections: Making the net work for neighbourhood Renewal**, identified the key role of adopting a creative, flexible approach to community engagement in ICT projects and that gradual “nurturing of the creative and imaginative potential of people through community arts and literacy projects helps create the confidence and the creative potential that is crucial to entrepreneurship” (p. 26).

Stage III: Consultation and Negotiation: The involvement of new, traditionally under-represented/non-participant groups in the adult learning process requires patient consultation. Dialogue and negotiation of their learning needs, interests and requirements must take place on a basis of mutual equality and respect. All aspects of the learning process for adults should be negotiated in advance: not just the form and nature of provision but methods of delivery, styles of learning, modes of evaluation, student services staff development, etc. A positive “comfort level” feeling is very important in this regard. The project sought to implement research findings and best practice in the provision of adult learning strategies in Cork.

Stage IV: Programme Development: The starting point for access and programme development is ‘working from where people are; using their environment, issues and concerns as a basis for development’. This approach takes cognisance of expressed learning interests and needs, acknowledges and uses peoples’ experiences in learning programmes and assists the process of personal and/or community empowerment. Community influenced content and its relevance to local issues, needs and circumstances was identified as an important factor sustaining participation and relatively high levels of individual motivation. Interestingly, the availability of relevant, useful, appropriate and affordable content has been identified as being of importance in European, and U.S. Research. Howard Besser (2003) in **The Digital Divide: Politics and Education** claimed “that the huge gap in the appropriateness of online content to under-served populations threatens to greatly increase social disparities” (p.2). The Children’s Partnership (2000) cited four content-related barriers to participation in e-learning, viz., lack of local information, literacy barriers, language barriers, and cultural diversity. Dr. Susan O’Donnell (2000) writing in regard to Ireland claimed that “creating useful local Internet content may be just as important as providing computers and Internet connections and that any strategy to close the digital divide must include active involvement of the community and voluntary sectors” (p. 3). BECTA (2001) posed a challenging question in relation to the role/nature of ICT content in the digital divide, viz. Does computer-based content that has equal relevance and value for all groups in society exist, or does content tend to reflect wider inequalities and power differentials? (p. 4). At a major European Congress on **Gender and the Information Society** last May, Itech Research (Ireland) claimed that a priority action in regard to promoting Internet use amongst older citizens should be “to support online local and community content development”.

Stage V: Programme Implementation: This is not a “front-loaded” process designed to provide for previously excluded, non-participant groups. Certain socio-cultural issues and psycho-personal conditions are essential in work with people who may have previously shunned formal learning opportunities or harbour negative experiences of previous learning such as:

- ~~///~~ provision of technical support;
- ~~///~~ flexibility of timing to suit personal/family responsibilities;

- ✂ informal learning environments in which learners can feel comfortable and unthreatened;
- ✂ sufficient time to master skills especially in ICT;
- ✂ participative and flexible learning methods;
- ✂ support mechanisms (help with costs, childcare, etc.);
- ✂ tutors with facilitating and enabling roles and skills;
- ✂ peer support mechanisms/processes

I must re-iterate the importance of gradual trust-building between the range of stakeholders/actors/participants as a key, but sometimes neglected, feature of access policies and provision. Used appropriately, ICTs can make a major contribution in access promotion and the amelioration of many factors that are causing social exclusion of particular groups. However, trust building and two-way communications channels are important and care must be taken to ensure that ICT provision, use and content is tailored to the specific needs of these groups. Otherwise, there is a danger that patterns of existing alienation, marginalisation, and non-participation may be reinforced and increased. As one major research project, **Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain** (2002) concluded: “less than 10% of the population see a dishwasher, a mobile phone, internet access or digital satellite television as necessities. It is important to bear this in mind when developing ICT strategies to alleviate the harsh social conditions affecting disenfranchised groups in Britain today” (p. 69).

A valuable, challenging and rich seam of research in England, Wales, Ireland and other European countries in recent years has focused on the many new community institutions promoting/providing access to ICTs, including telecottages, cyber cafes, electronic village halls, community technology centres etc. and their roles in relation to social inclusion in the information society. In a major contribution in this area, Liff and Steward, (2002) classify the range of latter initiatives as ‘e-gateways’. In this perspective “the nature of the information society is itself not fixed and an important issue in assessing inclusion is not just use but also participation in shaping society itself” (p. 1).

Significantly, this British research; with comparative perspectives from the US and Finland; challenged the narrow view of ICT access when viewed in terms of equipment provision, connectivity etc. The report stressed the importance of issues and factors, such as:

- ✂ individual/community motivation and confidence levels;
- ✂ actual patterns of use in relation to the potential ways in which persons can participate in, and engage with, the information society;

- ✍ the need for staged development in the learning of new social skills of participation via these technological media;
- ✍ learner/community influence over knowledge areas and content development;
- ✍ ‘blended’ methodologies which would enhance and develop interactive peer/community support systems;
- ✍ an inclusive process of socio-educational engagement in a learning partnership.

It is worth noting that accounts of the Information Society by Castells (1996); Van Dijk (1998) and others stress learning networks as important approaches and processes. In contrast to the under-representation by some groups in previous ‘digital divide’ research, such as internet use, Liff and Steward (2002) found that users of ‘e-gateway’ organisations and facilities were a more balanced cross section of the UK population and that in over 300 organisations “over 90% stated that one of their primary goals included providing access to new users and that they were successful in this task” (p.2).

These ICT community e-gateways were valuable in a variety of different ways, for example in:

- ✍ the promotion of participation by non-users;
- ✍ the development of social networks and personal links based on shared commitment to particular goals and learning objectives;
- ✍ the development of competence and cyberskills skills in new users, and
- ✍ the promotion of individuals’ participation in the virtual world in different user roles – consumer, communicators, or citizen.

The value of community links was evident in research in Los Angeles, which showed “that the community e-gateway model could be successful with young people and adults in the most extreme circumstances of social exclusion (locations with high levels of gang activity, widespread drug use etc.) providing the community links were in place” (p.2). Public access sites provided a significant opportunity for excluded/non-participant ICT persons to gain access to ICT and assistance in using it. Also, they provided a vital interface between users and information providers and services.

Keeble (2003) examined the effects and implications of a major project by the UK government in 700 ICT centres in deprived/excluded rural and inner city areas in England. The researcher challenged the underpinning assumption of government that simply by introducing technology to disadvantaged communities, the digital divide would be removed. She argued cogently that this “top-down”

approach has had limited success when it is not grounded in the realities of the day-to-day living experiences of individuals and community groups and the socio-economic-cultural climate in which they are located. The research produced substantial evidence that simply providing physical access opportunities, and support in skills training did not lead to individuals and communities making sustained, effective use of ICTs and that major consideration needed to be devoted to motivational orientations at the individual and community levels. It was noted, for example, that a lack of engagement with many voluntary and statutory personnel led to misunderstandings and incoherence in planning and development. The research identified tensions in policy objectives and ongoing strategy which sought to simultaneously promote involvement/employment in the knowledge economy, empower citizens and stimulate social capital through the adoption of ICTs. These competing objectives “had impacted negatively on the range of ICT services and provision” and the researcher concluded that “continued research is needed on how local communities deal with these competing objectives underpinning policy and the priorities given to these objectives” (p.16).

The findings outlined thus far in relation to the pivotal role of community organisations, resources and approaches to the promotion of access in ICTs/e-learning in Europe, are not dissimilar to the contributions of Pinkett (2000), The National Community Building Network (NCBN) (1996) and others here in the US.

Gorard, Selwyn and other colleagues at the University of Wales have been engaged over recent years in a series of significant projects on the broad theme of Technology, Learning and Exclusion in Wales. (Gorard and Selwyn, 2002) and it is claimed in a recent publication “that we simultaneously over estimated the reach of technological solutions and underestimate the complexity and intractability of the social problems we imagine new technology can solve,” (p. V). These authors claim that in a major UK survey of 6,000 households focussing on learners’ access to ICT and the role that ICTs play in facilitating participation in lifelong learning, that:

“clearly non-participation in education remains a significant and deep rooted trend in the UK with or without ICT based initiatives ... over a third of the population reported no learning episodes since reaching compulsory school leaving age ... and the data reiterate the conclusion that whether or not an individual participates in learning is a lifelong pattern, already presaged at school leaving age, and intrinsically related to long-term social, economic and educational factors”.

(Gorard, Selwyn, Madden and Furlong, 2002, p.11)

Their over-riding conclusion on the nexus between ICT and lifelong learning was presented in stark and challenging terms, viz.

“ICT can go some way to altering patterns of participation for some individuals but should on no account be assumed to be a universal panacea to achieving a truly inclusive learning society ... ICT should not be seen as a single variable in engineering interventions to the perceived crisis of non-participation nor should it distract from the more prosaic “off line” necessities of educational provision which should continue to be funded and prioritised” (pp. 12 – 13).

In another major research project on the role and operation of the Coleg Digidol/Digital College of Wales, the researchers express concern that “ICT is being treated, both by the government and some educators, as a “magic button” for the answer to the problems of social inclusion in lifelong learning” and they conclude that learner demands for ICT learning opportunities are unlikely to be significantly altered without a fundamental shift in individual, and indeed cultural, attitudes towards the value of learning (Williams, Selwyn and Gorard, 200, pp. 1 and 6).

I wish to briefly examine Irish public attitudes, perceptions and uses in relation to ICTs/e-learning. The Information Society of Ireland has played a very important role over the past years in focusing attention on the benefits of (ISI)/e-learning. The importance of access issues was reflected in a range of research reports which examined, inter alia,

- ~~///~~ familiarity with technology/communication services
- ~~///~~ access to and usage of the Internet
- ~~///~~ satisfaction with the Internet
- ~~///~~ attitudes to the Impact of Technology on People’s Lives

Results and data indicate that over recent years:

“there had been a significant growth in attitudes towards the Information Society among the general public Particular optimism has been expressed with regard to the impact of information and communication technology on jobs, education and social inclusion. This level of optimism is especially high amongst the younger generation.”

(I.S.I., 1998, p.1)

Familiarity with the language of the Information Society had improved significantly and a direct link was emerging between increase in familiarity with

ICTs such as: The Internet, Email, Worldwide Web, Modems and use of these media. A broad, set of positive attitudes to e-learning was reflected in various data sets.

The “Celtic Tiger” economy of recent years has made a huge contribution to positive national economic indices on a world scale. However, sharp disparities and substantial imbalances in relation to attitudes, technology use, ICT training, and satisfaction with the internet may distort access to, participation in, and use of ICTs/e-learning. A definite age gap was evident with in various data sets with two thirds of respondents feeling that the full impact of ICT will only be felt by the next generation. This indicated that a fairly strong tendency existed amongst older age groups to take refuge in the rather forlorn hope that this “revolution” would not impact directly on them. Many older persons felt daunted by the onset of digital T.V. and:

“parents are also very concerned that the fascination with the new technology, and particular the internet, will result in their children becoming obsessed with computer games at the expense of socializing with other children or taking exercise. People are concerned that computers should not become a substitute for normal social interaction”.
(p.7)

A sharp contrast was evident between “early adopters” of the new technology and “laggards”. Early adopters tended to be concentrated amongst males, the younger age groups, students, the middle class, those working in an office environment in medium/large companies and were most likely to live in Leinster (p.6). In contrast, the most negative perceptions of the Information Society were concentrated amongst the “laggards”, predominantly made up of older persons, manual workers, housewives, the farming community and more likely to be living outside of Leinster. These significant generational, gender, geographical, occupational and socio-economic differences, in terms of preparedness for the Information Society, and the generational gap in attitudes and use of new technological developments, thought probably not unexpected, may constitute significant barriers to access and participation in ICTs/e-learning. Recent evidence on ‘late adopters’; persons who use the Internet less than once a month; indicates that 55% of Irish adults are in this category (O’Donnell, 2003).

Irish policy development and practical projects in relation to ICT access have emphasised the important roles of community/voluntary organisations and community applications of ICTs. The ‘connected communities’ model was seen to have significant strengths and benefits, such as utilisation of social knowledge, using ICTs to promote/develop partnerships/networks, building of social capitals,

and “grounded” application of theoretical perspectives. The (Government) Information Society Commission (ISC), influenced by the publication in the US of the 1999 report “**Falling Through the Net**”, initiated a process of discussion/debate on ICT options and issues in Ireland. A huge response by community and voluntary organisations, education groups, business interests, concerned individuals and others indicated a high level of public concern and a newly created advisory group – Connected Communities - commissioned research into ICT access, use and attitudes in Ireland. It was clear from this research that strategies to increase Internet use in Ireland needed to be developed in the social inclusion area, alongside strategies to increase awareness of the Internet and lower the cost of using it. A strong role for community and voluntary organisations in ICT access facilitated a strong synergy with the social inclusion agenda. A wide range of innovative projects have been funded under the Community Application of Information Technologies (CAIT) scheme. Evaluation and feedback identified key success factors in this scheme such as the utilisation of local community leaders as role models/champions, a partnership development process in learning needs and content, a wide range of engagement meetings and events, and an emphasis on high quality technical materials. A wide range of community based initiatives currently operate in many different sectors in Ireland to promote/embed ICTs in society.

The ISC (2000), in a report to the Irish Government, entitled **Building the Knowledge Society**, identified e-inclusion as one of seven priority areas for the future. The Commission voiced concern at the slow pace of ICT development in relation to curriculum integration, teacher professional development, the need to lower computer/learner ratios and networking connectivity. While significant ICT initiatives to promote access/participation such as internet access points in community libraries, community-led projects aimed at engaging ‘late adopters’ of new technologies, the Equal skills pilot projects to build basic ICT literacy, the Commission concluded that:

“these initiatives have in the main been taken in isolation from each other. The Commission takes the view that there is room for significant improved coherence between Government initiatives in the e-inclusion area, supported by a stronger sense of underlying policy direction”

(Information Society Commission, 2002, p.60)

The Commission highlighted the very valuable role played by the Community and Voluntary Sectors in ICT access and e-inclusion. It was very strongly supportive of the concept of “Community Champions” as set out in policy and action plans to support the Universal Participation initiative, where such champions:

“working with the various education, training, business, local development and community and voluntary interests to agree objectives, encourage engagement with ICT, and create a shared sense of purpose in Information Society development”.

(Information Society Commission, 2002, p.62)

In conclusion, it is important to reiterate that socio-educational principles, in relation to the aims and objectives of learning, methodologies and learning strategies, content materials, and evaluation processes and procedures, must govern the future use and role of ICT/e-learning. We must develop appropriate individual/community strategies to enhance/promote access to ICTs/e-learning. We must emphasize inclusiveness, social engagement, and ensure that the new technology does not unintentionally condemn such groups as older learners, females, unemployed persons, lower socio-economic classes, unskilled persons and others to further exclusion. We must seek to make ‘learning how to learn’ in this ICT/e-learning age a priority across all forms of formal/informal learning so that we all can exploit the learning potential of the new ICTs to the full. We must promote an inclusive approach to I.T. literacy so as to avoid inter-generational tensions and make ICT/e-learning widely available in a wide range of different locations. We must conduct research which monitors and evaluates the use/types/benefits of ICT/e-learning within a broad range of lifelong learning environments. Strategic community learning partnerships guided by principles of inclusivity and sensitive socio-cultural engagement and animated by social inclusion policies may provide a significant enduring basis for access provision in ICT/e-learning for a range of non-participants, excluded groups. Professor John Field provided appropriate closure for this presentation when he commented in **The Adult Learner as Listener, Viewer and Cyber Surfer that:**

“ultimately, an inclusive learning society will depend on a range of different measures. In their absence, market distortions will damage the ability of key groups of adults to participate and will downgrade the quality of learning for many others. Technologies themselves will not bring about the required desirable changes; we need to understand and respond to the ways that they are used in real social settings such as the workplace and the home”

(Field, 1997, p. 40)

Table 1:
An Integrative Framework for the Digital Divide

| Access | Use |
|---|--|
| Technological Access | Technological Literacy |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ ICT Infrastructure ☞ Hardware, software, bandwidth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Technological skills ☞ Social and cognitive skills |
| Social Access | Social Use |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Affordability ☞ Awareness ☞ Language ☞ Content/Usability ☞ Location | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Information seeking ☞ Resource mobilization ☞ Social movements ☞ Civic engagement ☞ Social inclusion |

Source: Chan and Wellman, 2003

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