

Negotiating the digital divide: narratives from the have and the have-nots

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Abstract:

The digital divide is believed to intensify existing forms of privilege and exclusion. In spite of decades of governmental investment in Information and Communications Technology, this problem persists. Arguably, this is because we have not yet understood it well enough. Although 'access' is generally thought to be central to the digital divide, recent thinking has rendered this notion problematic. It is now felt that we should develop a better understanding of what 'access' might mean to different groups.

For this reason, in this paper, we have used a new approach to study experiences of the digital divide – the Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM). BNIM elicits narratives from participants, and then uses these to try and construct an understanding of the phenomena they have experienced.

For this particular study, we selected one student who was actively engaged in within a business course delivered in a blended learning format (lectures, seminars plus online activities offered within a VLE), and one student who made no effort to engage with the online materials. Thus we suggest these students could be at opposing sides of the digital divide, i.e. an archetypal 'have' and a 'have not', and they narrate how they negotiate their access to the online materials. This reveals a contrast in the spaces used for learning. One is encapsulated within a life lived with privilege, power and personal space. This context of controlled physical spaces enabled him to spread out and to work and to shut out the world. The other involves struggling to control the spaces the narrator encounters. He must negotiate the physical space of a new country with an unfamiliar transport system, and the learning space constituted by a technology that renders him powerless and unable to contribute. The interpretation of the interview also offers an insight into the role of the assistance of a more experienced friend, and how this can offer a conceptual framework to help to explain how this man eventually came to succeed on his own terms.

It is already well established that the traditional conception of the digital divide as a problem of access is an over-simplification; what this study shows is that even when open access facilities are provided, the disadvantaged are not as well placed to take advantage of this those who already hold social advantage. The "flexibility" offered by Virtual Learning Environments does not solve access issues either, but instead adds new spaces (e.g. the home) where these issues must be negotiated. This study suggests that the BNIM method offers a richness and depth of interpretation which leaves us feeling we know much more about how an individual student perceives the world in terms of the digital divide, and how the 'have' and the 'have nots' experience access to ICT in ways that replicate the unequal power structures of society.

Introduction

The digital divide is a familiar issue, which clearly has not been resolved yet. Arguably, this is because the central concept – ‘access’ – is more complex than is often assumed. In this paper, a new approach to studying this issue is presented. This approach uses the Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM) to reveal the complexities of access, as explained (in this case) by two students. After briefly situating this work in the wider research literature, a methodology is described and its relevance to this problem demonstrated. Two contrasting cases are used to highlight the conceptual complexity of ‘access’. The paper concludes by identifying implications for research and policy.

Literature Review

The digital divide exists. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) refer to the divide as the gaps in access to information and communication technology, which, “to some extent is simply a deepening of existing forms of exclusion” (OECD 2002:11). This is seen to be of growing importance in a society that has been positioned as a “knowledge economy”, and is something seen as having implications across the educational system (Peters & May, 2004).

Thus, arguably, the divide should be of concern to government policymakers, as without policy interventions, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) will intensify societal divisions, and thus increasingly marginalize those who are, “unemployed, poor, housebound, disabled, less educated, members of ethnic and cultural minorities - and in many countries, women” (OECD op.cit). This politicises access to technologies. Concern at the international level is mirrored nationally. The UK Government produced the ‘Harnessing Technology’ (2005) document, which outlined the relevance and strategic importance of ICT to the so called ‘UK PLC’ and emphasised the importance of a knowledge society in fuelling economic prosperity. Government policy, and e-learning policy, has a pervasive impact on all levels of education and it is therefore an issue of concern as to how these policies will affect those within Higher Education.

In the USA, similarly, there is concern over access to ICT. The US Commerce Department’s National Telecommunications and Information Strategy (NITA) commissioned the first of three reports back in July 1995 (Carvin 2000) to identify categories of online access throughout the USA and concluded in the final report in 1999 that access had soared for people in all demographic groups and geographic locations. However, the digital divide between the information rich and information poor had, according to final report, not only persisted but widened. The power of new technologies as an agent for economic and political change has consequences in both political actions and discourse (Loader 1998).

Indeed, access to higher education is politicised, classed and dependent upon previous education. And when the students do arrive in higher education, their business curriculum reflects a ‘hidden’ agenda, where many kinds of socialisation are covert, will not work if made visible, replicate forms of societal subordination, discrimination and hegemony that benefit some at the expense of others (Margolis et al 2001). Ehrensals (2001:99) argues, “That is, consent is first created in people’s heads and then reinforced by the playing of the game. The game is played in an arena in which all of the players know the rules long before they hear the starting whistle”.

As well, there are issues relating to socio-economic status, employment status, household types, gender, geographical location, age, income, ethnicity and disability (BeCTA, 2001; Warschauer, 2002). Nor is the problem fundamentally one of possessing technology – even those who own technology use it in differentiated ways, for social, psychological economic or pragmatic reasons (Selwyn, 2004). Instead, there are complicated patterns of differentiated use between different groups. For example, in Hargittai’s study in the United States of America (2002), peoples’ abilities to find online information were influenced by experience with technology and were negatively influenced by age (but apparently not influenced by gender). Moreover, if the digital divide is rethought in terms of literacy, rather than of use or access, it becomes clear that even these performances of skill studied by Hargittai oversimplify the situation. Prinsloo (2005), writing about “the way in which these limited skills were embedded in wider ways of social and individual being”, calls instead for studies of the

way that introducing technology disrupts local practices and values – arguing the necessity of such work for understanding what inclusion and exclusion might actually mean in specific cases.

Indeed, there is no reason to assume that high levels of use (such as those stereotypically associated with “haves”) are in any way “normal”, except that they happen to be common amongst many of those who have framed the debate in the first place (Potter, 2006).

Clearly the effects – and causes – are not simple. Although the debate is often framed in terms of the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’, there is widespread recognition that neither ownership of nor access to technology adequately explains the situation. Indeed, initiatives that provide increased access to technology – such as “hole in the wall” project for street children in India, or initiatives to promote a 1:1 computer ownership ratio (the one lap-top per child) – can cause as many problems as they solve by interfering in successful social practices (Warschauer, 2002).

Current research into the digital divide advocates that technologies are not value-neutral, and can only be understood when placed “within a wider political context of an unequal and changing pattern of power relationships” (Loader, 1998:7). An issue in the digital divide, then, is how these power relationships play out within the educational system. “Students...tend to experience HE as a series of struggles propelled by discourses of derision, over-assessment, increasing participation in paid employment and, perhaps, those e-learning initiatives designed to liberate resources rather than support staff or empower students” (Lillis 2001, Sinfield et al 2004). Are the inequalities of society replicated in the classrooms of our Universities?

Recognising the complexity of the digital divide/s has led researchers to call for new types of study to be undertaken – ones that explore peoples’ patterns of use and seek to understand them (e.g. Selwyn, 2004; Potter, 2006). This paper seeks a richer understanding of the digital divide from the student perspective, and the tradition we will frame the work in is within the phenomenological approach, where the meaning of the lived experiences for individuals about a concept or the phenomenon is explored (Cresswell 1998:51). In the next section, an approach will be explored which is designed to support such enquiry.

Method

Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM) draws upon the ‘gestalt’ German school of thought from the early 20th century and is a particular method used to draw out the “stories” or narratives from interviewees’ lives (Wengraf 2001). What is of interest to the researcher is what the interviewee selects to tell us, and the way in which the story is told. The interview is structured such that the interviewee has the time and space to develop their own narrative contribution. The interview transcripts are then interpreted through a microanalysis of the lived life, with the aim of encapsulating the ‘part’ of the transcript, as representative of the whole interview. Thus, the Biographic Narrative Interpretative method (BNIM) method starts from the ‘deliberately narrow position’ that interview data are only about a particular research conversation that occurred at a particular time and place. The BNIM approach, Wengraf (2001) suggests, limits counter transference, which is the emotional reaction of the interviewer to the interviewee’s subject matter. The BNIM method has a key advantage for interviewing participants known to the interviewer, as it can, in part, address issues of power relationships. Thus, this particular interview method recognises that power relationships do exist, and sets out a robust framework within which the researcher invites the participant to set the agenda, and by staying silent yet demonstrating empathy, encourages narrations of the participant’s choice. The interview method of three ‘parts’ enables the researcher to stand apart from the interview emotionally and therefore examine power as a topic in its own right.

Each session (interview) is divided into three ‘parts: the first is introduced by a single question aimed at inducing narrative (SQUIN). In the second part of the interview, the interviewer paraphrases key themes back to the interviewee and elicits further explanation. The latter stage of the interview is where the interviewer’s agenda comes in. I asked specifically about the student’s experience of online learning.

In this research, at the beginning of the interview, participants were invited to talk around carefully constructed open-ended questions. These are carefully worded to induce narrative, or as Wengraf (2001) explains, to elicit a 'story' which may offer an opportunity for more interpretative analysis. In the BNIM method, the interview analysis focuses upon the 'story', and these narratives typically account for around 30% of the whole interview. The approach draws upon aspects of ethnography such as use of description and a high level of detail; telling a story "informally" as a storyteller; exploring cultural themes of roles and behaviour; description of "everyday life of person"; and finally interpreting through a format that is descriptive (case study of each person; analysis and interpretation). The full context of the interview and interviewee, utilising tape transcripts, are considered through both interviewee and 'researcher-self' (Coffey 2003:131, cited in May) where the personal narrative of the researcher has formed part of what has been told, collected and (re) presented in the research and writing process. The transcripts are complete to give the fullest possible potential for analysis; so, for example, pauses, participant's "errms", "ahs" and so on are included, as it may be possible to derive most interpretation from extracts following a point in the interview where time has been used by the participant to frame an exact response. The Wengraf method of identifying text 'chunks' was followed by sorting text into 'description', 'argumentation', 'reporting', 'narrative' and 'evaluation'. The narrative extracts were the focus for interpretation.

A number of routine ethical issues had to be considered (<http://www.bera.ac.uk/>). I finally decided to ask each student agreeing to be interviewed to sign an ethics form. This form very simply explained the research I was undertaking, stated that their names would remain anonymous, and that the tapes would be destroyed upon the conclusion of the research project. The form explained, as I did verbally, that at any point during the interview, the student would be free to withdraw, and at that point the tape would be returned to them.

Case study one: Charles – power, privilege and personal space

Here we meet Charles, a white, middle class student in his early thirties, and a feature of this analysis is his strong identity of self. My interpretation of the data /interview transcript led me to conclude that he is confident in his abilities both as a worker and as a student, and transfers skills from one arena to the other. In terms of negotiating his own time and space to study, he is prepared to work hard and effectively in the comfort of his own home, where he can shut out the world. Middle class values of deferred gratification and the commercial values of the professional in industry can explain in part his determination to succeed and his view of the educational process as a series of tasks to be undertaken. His language reflects the neo-liberal notions of success and reward of the individual. A key feature of his narrative was a constant comparison of himself with other learners, placing himself in the 'top 10%' of the classroom. He uses terms that classify the other students in his class by 'success' or 'failure' on a sliding scale. For example, when talking about forming online groups for an assessment, he comments, 'then the lower end of the group would be excluded from that I think.' My interpretation of this comment, given his tone and expression concluded that this meant that the students he would place at the lower end would not be capable of forming an online group. He is satisfied with his own group, because, as he comments, 'the top 10% would be able to form themselves into sensible groups who could work together'.

He is aware of his privileged position, and explains that he is at a little bit of advantage, because he is working and has the money to buy text books, "even when they're not essential." There is a sense of privilege from the resources Charles has access to in his home environment, and privilege is a recurring theme.

Charles can be described as an independent learner as he shows confidence in approaching the teaching/learning materials on his own. He displays "white middle class" self assurance in his own abilities in negotiating with the lecturer an alternative teaching mode, that is not available "by strictly following rules". He displays independent learning characteristics by minimal contact with the lecturer – only checking when there is a query he is concerned with, and queries were mainly to do with how high marks could be gained for the module assessment (Tutor reflective log). yet he knows that there is still untapped support from the

lecturer should this be needed. This approach suggests an economy of effort, which reflects the business world in which Charles operates.

Charles talks about others with an emphasis on difference – mainly the differences he perceives in himself viz-a-viz the other students.

“It was interesting seeing the difference in general world view between the younger and older students...some younger students were a bit naïve I think”. He explores issues of teaching and learning in a similar vein: “the seminar its notionally an hour long and by the time everyone gets in gets settled and you end up getting put in groups where you have 5 people and 3 of them aren’t interested.”

Noticeably Charles does not see himself as one of these implicit timewasters, and wouldn't categorise himself as a non-interested participant. Throughout the interview, he uses scores to categorise “good” and “bad” learners, thus drawing upon the competitive business arena and applying this to his learning forum. He has high expectations himself, and is intolerant of others.

Charles is pragmatic and determined to succeed in the group coursework for his studies. A significant incident is narrated, when, as part of the course, he is required to work with two other students on a piece of work. Power and control of the situation is initiated by Charles and accepted by Andrew, another part-time student attending the class on a day release basis. These two students accept they must have the third person, who clearly does not have their experience of work. The response initiated by Charles is to collude with Andrew to perform well, despite having the third group member. They are content to let the third student have a free ride so the ‘group’ succeeds. They choose to model the world of work's team working approach to solving the perceived problem of including the young student. The “task” must be accomplished at any cost. Other options were of course possible – a mentoring or coaching relationship may have been beneficial to the triad, or encouraging the young student to share in the views and experiences of the working students.

He is able to draw upon his work experiences to ensure he is able to gain the high grades he considers he deserves. Charles himself sees value in setting goals and working hard to achieve these goals. In terms of utilising ‘hard’ commercial skills that would be valued in the workplace, he can be seen in his studies, to be ruthless in his quest to succeed, as his comments on group work illustrate. By rationalising he is thus able to justify to himself, and to his colleague, the ruthless exclusion of the third (younger student) from the group assessment process.

“The third person, to be honest, it was, its difficult really without being critical but he was young and he didn't have a clue. We decided between us that actually there's no real contribution to either pieces of work. He had a free ride.....and no disrespect I cant even remember his name, but looking at practical examples both assessments have to use a company as a case study. I used mine and Andrew used his. Its difficult to bring a third party into that and have them make a sensible contribution because they don't know anything about the way companies workand the small amount we did sort of getting to pull together earlier on, was always late. I find it easier to do a piece of work on my own”

Despite trying to justify this solution by saying “without being critical” and “no disrespect,” Charles goes on to be both extremely critical and extremely disrespectful, claiming that the third group member “hasn't a clue” and has no idea “about the way companies work.” The young student is disempowered and left with very little option but to go along with the older, more experienced group members. The young student, however, does not try to change the arrangements, and may indeed see value in tagging along as a non-performing third, as the reward would be a share in the good marks on the basis of the work of the other two group members.

Materially, Charles has negotiated space and time in the home, a settled environment within which to study. He has access to a lap top computer. There is a feeling of physical space where notes can be spread out “as far as you can see”. He feels free to make a mess at home. Internet access is also evident, as Charles would not select to work in an IT room at university, nor a quiet study area designated for student writing.

Later in the interview, Charles talks about how he works independently. There are clues to a privileged existence, which may be very different to that of other interviewees. His educational needs almost colonise his home life in terms of time and space. Here we have an example:

“When you’re at home you just get home from work, sit down and say this where I need to be by the end of tonight and you just sit down and you do it until its done and if it takes an hour or it takes to 4 in the morning depending how close your deadlines are, then that’s what you do and you just get down and focus and you can block the rest of the world out.”

University space is definitely not of equal value to Charles, as he comments,

“Whereas in the University, the IT rooms are generally ...quite noisy and there’s no space to spread out and I’m a very messy worker. I sit there with my lap top in front of me and there’s paper as far as you can see, in every direction.”

His use of home space and time means that he is able to set his own parameters for study time, and has all the necessary resources to assist him.

The home space does not have to be negotiated, and Charles is able to use his time to meet his own needs first. There is no evidence of a partner or family sharing this space, and it is noticeable in the transcript of the interview that Charles only talks about work and study, and these concerns frame the world that he constructs. Family/friends of Charles possibly share his values, as there are no concerns shared about having free time to work on his studies. There is a sense of privilege that echoes back to his perceptions of his power in terms of the rest of the world, issues of power, authority and control.

Case study two: Kwame - struggles in an alien world

The following case follows the experiences of a black male student from Ghana, who came to the UK to study a one-year postgraduate diploma. As Kwame tells his story, we find this is one of overcoming challenges, and finding alternative strategies to solve his problems without engaging with those he perceives as ‘in authority’. He uses friends and family to help him make sense of an alien new world – coming from Ghana to study in the UK, he finds settling into UK life difficult. By starting classes late, Kwame explains his difficulty in making sense of the online component of the learning. In this interview, he puts a high value on the technological drivers of the course, and this is reflected through his explanations of his country, and their need to move forward with technology. It is reflected also in his previous study experience – Kwame has (on paper) computing and IT skills, but the explanation of how this is taught in higher education in Ghana (in large classes of 70, where students were offered theory but limited access to machines) offers insights into how important he personally values access to this scarce commodity. Finally, this interview offers an insight into the role of the assistance of a more experienced friend, and can offer a conceptual framework to help to explain how this man has come to succeed on his own terms.

This interview was unique, in that when the opening question was asked, the response from Kwame immediately, with no pause for thought came straight back:

“It was horrible.(pause) It was very, very horrible because I didn’t know anybody in this country(pause). It was just a family friend I know in Milton Keynes and you can imagine coming down from Milton Keynes to

London as a new guy, the whole thing looked very strange and confusing. So basically the first week I found myself keeping on asking people a lot of questions. I didn't know anything at all. So in the first weeks it was horrible and I also came late (pause). I was a bit late, about 3 weeks late, so when I came the programme had already started so I had to force myself into the programme."

He illustrates his experiences when asked, "Can you give me any examples about, you said you had a very horrid experience, is there anything particular where you really felt "I could just pack up and go home now?"

Kwame: Yes, why I can't synchronise transport. I don't know the transport system and where I was living was very far from the university so that was the first thing and apart from that the system, especially the computer system in Ghana, it wasn't like that (rushed speech). So when I came here and everything was about a computer and everything was about the technology. It was quite new to me so that was a bit of a problem.

Kwame uses very emotive words in this extract. I ask him about his first couple of weeks 'here' which could be interpreted either as the UK or the University, and he talks about 'horrid' in terms of space – a long way from the University; in terms of not knowing anyone; in terms of starting the class late. He talks about 'forcing' himself into the programme, and this seems to be very difficult for him.

You came with the international purchasing, this online programme, I didn't know it. (pause) It was a new thing to me. I knew the answer but how to communicate it, it was a difficult problem.

Kwame talks here about his dilemma – he knows the answer, but not how to communicate this in the online environment. It is interesting that he internalises this as his own problem, and does not expect the tutor to work with him to solve this problem that is clearly impacting on his chances of a successful outcome to his studies. This can in part be explained by his previous education, of large classes, tutors explaining theory and not having resources to practice what is being taught. His expectations of the tutor are minimal – "You even gave me a sheet to go and look at and I used that one." When he remains baffled and confused by the course, he does not approach the tutor again, but looks, instead, he solves his problem by finding a friend, a friend he makes within the class – another male black African student attending in very similar circumstances. The friend acts as a coach, by talking to him on the telephone while Kwame is on the Internet accessing the course.

It is significant that this friend doesn't have to be physically present to provide the support he needs, but the reassurance provided by the friend is fine, even though there is a physical space dimension between where Kwame is staying with his family friend, and the college friend from London. The technology itself is enabling him to resolve his technological problems – having broadband and being to access the telephone at the same time.

'access to technology is a huge issue'

This is a really significant extract, as my interpretation of this quote is that within these few words, Kwame is conceptualising the need for both his country (Ghana) and also his own need to succeed using IT. It is not just about IT for one teaching module, but IT for life – he realises that being computer literate is important in life chances and choices, and unknown to the tutor, is working through alternative strategies to enable him to word process essays for all his classes, using internet sources for research and sees the computer not just as passive in terms of seeking information, but as active in he is now using it within a social context of 'talking to people'.

“and in Ghana we did not have seminars...I didn't know how to handle everything so I had to keep quiet and listen to people, how people deal in class and stuff like that before I finally got myself involved in it.”

My interpretation of the data /interview transcript led me to conclude that Kwame is an intelligent man with the commitment, drive and ability to succeed. However, in a large group, he is silenced – by the online course, which he cannot access; by the other students, who speak out in the lectures and seminars and ask questions of the tutor in a way he finds disrespectful; by the seminar time, where students are expected to work together in small groups

*Its very simple to use if you know
We know it in Africa, in Ghana that it was good but we don't have it.*

These two extracts illustrate the significance of the power and influence of the computer, and can be interpreted as both the importance of the computer for him, Kwame as an individual, but also for his own country. The power of those that 'have' and 'don't have access' links into whole theories of globalisation, economic and political power and control. Hence time and space dimensions for Kwame in the home environment represents to him the freedom to work as he chooses, and the technology (PC and internet access, plus mobile telephone) enables him to access his friend and mentor when it suits him.

In terms of self-confidence Kwame, as the interview is coming to a conclusion proudly announces: *“and I have my own computer now”*

This is a key achievement for him, and he is obviously delighted that he has moved from the 'have not' in powers and control of the online environment (and hence power and control in other aspects of his life) to being a person that 'has', here he acknowledges this by stating, *“it is very simple to use if you know”* and the knowing, for Kwame, is the achievement.

Discussion

What these cases reveal are the local and specific practices that defined students' engagement with the course. As expected, this was not a simple matter of access to technology; instead, these accounts reveal that engagement (including engagement with technology) was shaped by the students' existing dispositions and social connections.

We can conceptualise Charles in terms of his strong work ethos. He is used to negotiating with employers (his promotion), his lecturers (doing the courses remotely) and his partner/friends/family (giving him space, physical/mental) are encouraging him to study now for reward in the future. He has a 'good' educational profile in that he enters the university with standard 'A' levels. Skills that he has developed in the workplace are evident in his attitude to study – time management skills, handling deadlines skills, a focus on the task, shutting out the rest of the world. The latter may reflect a masculine style of identity in a world where the male is still rewarded as the main income source within the household.

Kwame was also passionate about working hard, but his experiences were markedly different. Kwame narrates his experiences of education as a story of exclusion, alienation and difficulty. He has bridged the traditional divide (access), as he is studying at University, and has access to the various online resources. However, the frustration of having the theory of how to use a computer, and the practicalities of finding that he is unable to transfer the knowledge and skills is evident. It takes time for Kwame to find his feet at the University, and a higher education system where modular teaching lasts for eleven weeks is not sufficient.

Charles quickly achieves what Kwame struggles throughout the narrative to accomplish: a connection between established social practices and this new context (the taught course). It was not until Kwame established friendships that he could draw upon to help him take control of his use of technology that the divide between the two began to close.

Power relationships are evident in Charles' account of his experience of the course. He views the lecturer/student relationship as a partnership and sees communication as the key to the learning experience, not the online medium. He comments, "in terms of the way the material was structured I didn't really miss having the face-to-face lectures because we had a reasonably good communication process anyway". There is an expectation of the teacher providing material for the student. He is more willing to take the risk of using technology online because he can "fall back" on phone/email if problems arise. His power thus comes from a match between resources and approaches he has already mastered and those that are encouraged by the module. Although he has to take a risk when engaging with a new form of learning and teaching, his risk is minimal and is managed. Indeed, the module was designed with flexibility in mind, as it is offered to day release students as well as undergraduate students. The tutor is thus complicit in allowing Charles to use success elsewhere (world of work) to be successful on this module. Charles becomes powerful in this module because the tutor is sanctioning and valuing the kinds of approach (the business approach) he has already mastered. He is confident to 'play the system' to his advantage, even to the extent of excluding and rejecting the contributions from other students. The online experience suits Charles and his style of working and he values the autonomy he has to study in his own time and in his own space.

One of the most striking aspects about Kwame's interview, in contrast, is the huge inequality in who has access to computers in the polytechnic in Ghana. In his own words,

"we did computers in the first year and that was theory. So you can imagine and then when I finished the first year, the whole of the second year, no access to a computer, the whole of the third year no access to a computer and then when I finished it, I was about to come here, then we got computers. So all the things we were doing were manual. So when I came here the computer system was quite different and then how you enter the university you have to go and log into the system. All these things were a problem for me."

Unlike Charles, who was confident enough to use other forms of communication when he had problems, Kwame's attempts to build a relationship with the tutor and with fellow students were hampered by his technical problems. Simple advice about other possibilities for discussion would have transformed his engagement during the module. Although he has clearly articulated wants and needs the University Modular Schemes and Compulsory Core modules take no cognisance of these. Kwame scraped through the course, incorrectly labelled as a disengaged student; and he succeeded despite any assistance the tutor may have offered him.

Conclusions

Recognising that the digital divide is more complicated than a simple division between those who have access to technology and those who do not is only a starting point. This situation calls for different kinds of research, which will illuminate individuals' experiences of inclusion and exclusion. In this paper a research methodology has been described and demonstrated that is able to explore these issues.

Close analysis of students' narratives about their learning experiences reflected many of the key themes from the literature. Power, the changing role of the tutor and the relationship between technology and flexibility all feature strongly in the accounts presented here. What was novel, however, was the important of controlling spaces for learning. These accounts showed how easily Charles was able to colonise new spaces for study (at home, online) using principles from his work in industry. Further, Charles presented himself as a work-oriented character being competitive in his approach to group tasks with 'others'; we see him challenging the inclusive approach modelled by the lecturer. He is in no way apologetic about this; there is a confident honesty in this interview, and this leaves us feeling we know much more about how he perceives his world. Kwame, by contrast, felt powerless to even operate the online environment, let alone to bypass it. It was not until a friend supported him in learning how to use this resource that he began to feel able to contribute his voice to the

ongoing module discussions. The irony here is that the online learning materials had been created to support the widening participation agenda; yet in these cases, it was the traditional 'good' student who thrived. Kwame, with his unconventional background, simply experienced this well-intended development as another set of barriers that delayed his participation in the course. It was only because he established a friendship and explained his needs to this friend that his engagement with the module altered.

Despite government strategies encouraging recruitment of Widening Participation students and of utilising e-learning in creative ways – and despite extensive internal audit systems and paper trails – when students arrived (late) there were no practices in place to take account of them or their needs. Even the e-learning initiative, designed to help the student, became another barrier to be overcome. Despite the fact that Kwame has a very clear, articulated motivation for engaging with new technology – for himself, for his wider community, for his country as a whole – the university was unprepared to take account of his specific wants and needs. His identity is lost within the institution, the course and online:

'In the new hyperreal world, an individual is de-historicized and de-centred ...deprived of all materiality and referent ... the individual no longer exists' (Mraovic 2005; 11).

Education cannot change societal inequality. Simply providing e-learning – no matter how well intentioned – is insufficient to address the problems that students are experiencing. Further studies are needed that can reveal more about how individuals experience and cope with their engagement in formal education. With such accounts, it will begin to be possible to develop new pedagogical approaches, and perhaps new policies, which respond to students' needs in a better-informed way, and hearing the student voice clearly is a starting point.

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