Bridging the Digital Divide in Education

A lot is being done to help bridge the digital divide. “Political measures within the United States have been made in the attempt to lessen the digital divide. In 2009, Congresswoman Doris Matsui introduced the Broadband Affordability Act, which calls for the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to install a program that allows low-income citizens to get access to more affordable broadband Internet service” (Wikipedia). There needs to be more accessibility to broadband service in order to bridge the gap between high-income and low-income students. “The Broadband Affordability Act models the FCC’s Lifeline Assistance program, which offers basic telephone service to low-income households at just, affordable, and reasonable rates” (Wikipedia). It is through organizations like these that the divide is beginning to close a bit.

One of the main challenges in overcoming the digital divide is that there is not enough funding in countries to solve the problem. “The funds available to fight the digital divide throughout the public sector are a large multiple of those spent by technology and infrastructure authorities alone. Countries do not know which agency manages which kinds of ICT-funds, and do not even make an effort to track these resources. Not even the most developed countries collect this kind of information, but merely focus on the ad-hoc funds spent by the telecom authority. When the digital divide is defined in terms that go beyond mere access, the logical conclusion is to set up a coherent inter-agency policy strategy, which includes health, education and defense authorities. The first task has to be to take inventory of the funds available to the entire public sector. This is generally not done and we do not have a real picture about what is actually done to close the digital divide” (Wikipedia).

In a different attempt to bridge the divide, more businesses are making their locations have free access to Wi-Fi for students to use in order to complete assignments. While this is a good idea, it ignores the underprivileged population who may not even have laptops. “This solution implies that everyone owns a laptop. Many disadvantaged students who have no Internet access do not own computers so the Wi-Fi is pointless. The Wi-Fi is most likely only helping a small percentage of civilians that can afford a laptop but cannot afford high quality Internet access” (Wikipedia). There are positives and negatives to all solutions of bridging the digital divide, and while having free and available Wi-Fi is a good thing, it does not help all individuals who are in need of assistance.

Most importantly, people need to be aware of the digital divide. They also need to be informed that the gap is widening. “...the wealthy will continuously use their skills and technology to further their businesses while the underprivileged will continue to fall behind” (Wikipedia). Inventing and incorporating new technologies is not the cause of the digital divide---humans that ignore the population of underprivileged people are. Technology is not the cause of the digital divide, rather the cause of the digital divide is humans who are ignoring an entire population of people. “If the wealthy (those with a higher socio-economic status) use technology to both further their own research and businesses and help the underprivileged, then perhaps the gap between these two classes will lessen” (Wikipedia).

How can we bridge the Digital Divide?

- Donate old computers
- Make financial donations to schools
- Spread the word: Tell friends, colleagues, or peers about the digital divide and inform them of ways they can help
- Get involved and volunteer with a program who is working to bridge the divide (CNET Networks, One Laptop per Child, 50 x 15, Geekcorps, EduVision, Inveneo, etc.)

In parts of the developing world, less than 1 in every 1,000 people have access to a computer compared to nearly 600 in every 1,000 in the developed world (www.bridgethedigitaldivide). For this reason, it is important for us to do everything we can to help bridge this divide.