Introduction

A major concern about the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in adult education is that the digital divide may reinforce the already existing learning divide, because it runs along the same lines of socio-economic class, gender and ethnicity (eg, Gorard & Selwyn, 2005). Many researchers report a socio-economic digital divide, as well as a gender gap, although the latter seems to be closing slowly. However, it can be noted that often, several years lie in between the publications and the data on which the research is based, which may be problematic in an area evolving rapidly. Nevertheless, any programme designed for adult e-learning, should consider carefully if and how the use of ICT may exclude specific subgroups of its targeted population, particularly when addressing less prestigious occupational groups (Selwyn & Gorard, 2003).

The case of Belgian family day care providers

Family day care providers (FDC) providers in Flanders (Belgium) are an interesting case to study the potentialities and problems with adult e-learning because they are a highly gender-segregated profession with low professional status, as well as a target group for enhancing professionalisation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). Innovative projects are therefore developed to introduce this workforce to e-learning (see http://www.vbjk.be/eequal.htm). An exploratory study was carried out between January 2006 and April 2006 to assess to what degree technology may be integrated in FDC providers’ experience, cultures and beliefs (La Velle & Nichol, 2000). The study was based on a survey of 551 women with a mean age of 44 years. Access to computers in the sample was high: 88.2 and 93.4% of the women also have Internet access. Another finding was that 67.5% of the respondents regularly use the computer. FDC providers without a PC at home are, on average, 52.5-years old (SD = 10.14), significantly older than PC owners (M = 42.88; SD = 8.99) (t = 7.602; p = 0.000). Binomial logistic regression with computer access as dependent variable and previous work experience involving PC use is significant ($\chi^2 = 64.865; p = 0.000$), and $R^2$ varies between Cox & Snell 0.142 and Nagelkerke 0.275, indicating that access to a PC in the
home can only partially be explained by this model of independent variables. An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) of the perceived PC skills as dependant variable and including education; previous work experiences with a PC; previous adult training in PC use; and age as independent variables showed that only age as independent variable was interrelated with PC skills ($F = 20.685; p = 0.000$). The adjusted $R^2$ of the total model was 0.118, suggesting that other variables need to be included to explain individual variation in PC skills. We also studied anxiety and motivation of the 32.5% non-users ($n = 150$). In general, the non-users showed rather low levels of anxiety and higher levels of motivation. ANCOVA shows that neither anxiety nor motivation is explained by education or age. Anxiety and motivation in our sample need to be considered as personal variables that may not run along tradition lines of the digital divide. Almost the entire sample has some sort of support in their direct environment: 97.2% of the PC users and 95.1% of the non-users have someone they can turn to in case of problems, most often their spouse or children.

**Discussion**

There is a case for growing optimism in the possibilities of e-learning in less prestigious occupational groups. Access to a PC or the Internet may cause less concern in the future, but there remains a digital divide in PC use that needs to be taken into account when setting up educational programmes. However, the digital divide may be changing and is now less embedded in tradition or history and more influenced by individualised, personal contexts. Consequently, one needs to be very cautious when analysing data that are based on surveys of some years back. It may also be beneficial to look at individual ecologies, such as the PC skills of peers and household members: individuals without PC experience very often live in a household that has this experience.

**References**


