

The following article is an adaptation of "Teaching English Across the Technology/Wealth Gap" by Charles Moran and Cynthia Selfe (1999) and "Falling Through the Net II: New Data on the Digital Divide" from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (1998). Reprinted with permission from the authors.

Teaching English Across the Technology/Wealth Gap

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Abstract: Many studies have demonstrated that women and minorities have less access to technology than white males. What these studies miss, however, is that socio-economic **class**—especially when it intersects with race and gender—is the primary factor in access to technology.

As English teachers who love technology we are in a difficult situation. The more we bring technology into our classrooms, the more we privilege the wealthy students in our classes, those whose families can afford to stay up with computer technology as it evolves. Rich schools and schools with high populations of white students have lots of technology, and poor schools and schools with high populations of students of color have less. Wealthy families have home computers; poor families likely do not; white families are more likely to have home computers than are families of color.

"But isn't this just the same old story," we hear you ask. "The wealthy have greater access to everything --- legal aid, health care, transportation--- than do the poor; and poverty has always been related to race in this country. That's the way it has always been." "Well, yes," we respond. ... But in America we also believe strongly in the power of our democratic system and in the way such a system must be supported by universal public education designed to provide equal opportunity for all citizens—not simply those who are wealthy and white. According to this potent set of beliefs, public education in America is generally envisioned ... as a system that prepares individuals to take their place in a democratic society as productive and literate citizens who have some understanding of democratic government, some exposure to intellectual issues, some preparation for making a living in a trade or profession, and some opportunity to move up the economic ladder—regardless of their socio-economic status or color. This belief in a citizenry broadly educated to take its place in a democratic system is a potent and persistent vision.

Research from "Falling Through the Net II: New Data on the Digital Divide" from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration

(full report available at: <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/net2/falling.html>)

While the ownership of PCs has grown most significantly for minority groups since 1994, Blacks and Hispanics still lag far behind the national average. White households are still more than twice as likely (40.8%) to own a computer than Black (19.3%) or Hispanic (19.4%) households (Chart 1).

Chart 1: Percent of U.S. Households with a Computer By Race/Origin

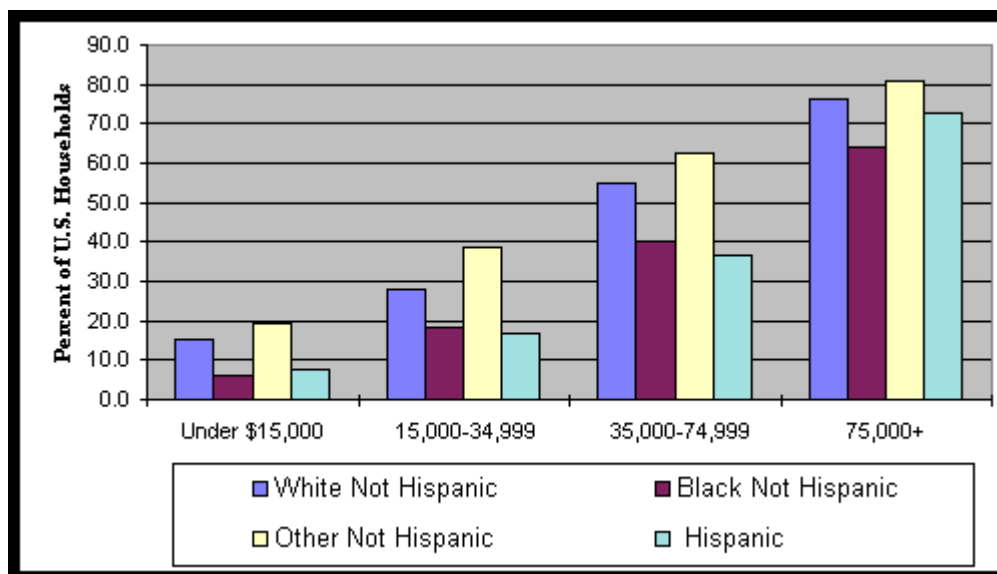
	U.S. 1994	U.S. 1997
White Not Hispanic	27.1	40.8
Black	10.3	19.3
Asian Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Aleuts, and Eskimos	32.6	47.0
Hispanic	12.3	19.4

This divide is apparent across all income levels: even at incomes higher than \$75,000, Whites are more likely to have PCs (76.3%) than are Blacks (64.1%) (Chart 2). Similarly, the rates for on-line access are nearly three times as high for Whites (21.2%) as for Blacks (7.7%) or Hispanics (8.7%).

Chart 2: Percent of U.S. Households with a Computer By Income By Race/Origin 1997

	Under \$15,000	15,000-34,999	35,000-74,999	75,000+
White Not Hispanic	15.4	28.0	55.1	76.3
Black	6.3	18.2	40.2	64.1
Asian Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Aleuts, and Eskimos	19.1	38.5	62.6	81.0
Hispanic	7.8	16.6	36.8	72.8

Note: In the following figure, "Other non-Hispanic" indicates Asian Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Aleuts, and Eskimos



Significantly, the digital divide between racial groups in PC-ownership has *increased* since 1994. In 1997, the difference in PC-ownership levels between White and Black households was 21.5 percentage points, up from 16.8 percentage points in 1994. Similarly, the gap in PC-ownership rates between White and Hispanic households in 1997 has increased to 21.4 percentage points, up from 14.8 percentage points in 1994. This gap has increased at almost all income levels, including at incomes above \$75,000, where some might have expected computer-ownership rates to converge.

The Wealth/Access Gap

Many studies have demonstrated that women and minorities have less access to technology than white males. What these studies miss, however, is that socio-economic class—especially when it intersects with race and gender—is the primary factor in access to technology. Certainly gender, race, and socio-economic class are overlapping sets: that is, it is more likely in our country that a person of color, and/or a woman, will be poor than it is that a white male will be poor. Yet at Smith College, five miles from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, every woman student has full access to computers. The same, of course, is true at neighboring colleges: Mt. Holyoke, Amherst, and Hampshire. In these cases, wealth is the difference: a woman at Smith or Mt. Holyoke or Hampshire will have full access to technology; at the University of Massachusetts, a state public university, students, irrespective of gender and race, must bring/buy their own computers or travel, at night, to a distant lab, and wait in line for a two-hour stint at someone else's computer. In K-12 education, the access gap is a function of the wealth-gap between

school districts: when one school district spends \$13,000/student and another spends \$4,000, the wealthy district will install new technologies; the poor district will not.

In 1996, Secretary of Education Richard Riley (*Getting America's Students Ready*) noted a differential ownership of computers by households according to race and geographical location:

...[H]ousehold possession and use of computers and network services is...reflective of the digital divide: it is heavily skewed toward middle and upper-class homes. Low income citizens and black and Hispanic Americans, urban and rural [poor] are much less likely to own a computer than others....[W]hite Americans are two to three times as likely to own a computers as black or Hispanic citizens and six times as likely to own them than the rural poor, whatever their background (36).

Similar trends—albeit, with some complex new variations—have been reported as late as 1998. In a recent article published in *Science*, for example, Hoffman and Novak (1998) identified the following findings:

- "...73% of white students owned home computers, only 32% of African American students owned one. This difference persisted when we statistically adjusted for student's reported household income" (390).
- "...[A]s one would expect, ...increasing levels of income corresponded to an increased likelihood of owning a home computer, regardless of race. In contrast, adjusting for income did not eliminate the race differences with respect to computer access at work....Notably..., race differences in Web use vanish at household incomes of \$40,000 and higher" (390).
- "...[W]hite students lacking a home computer, but not African American students, appear to be accessing the Internet from locations such as the homes of friends and relatives, libraries, and community centers" (391).

The Technology/Wealth Gap is Widening

The wealth/access gap we have described above is bad enough. What is worse is the clear evidence that this gap is widening, and has been doing so at an increasing rate. What we are seeing in our classrooms—the widening gap between the haves and have-nots, and the related effects of race—are functions of what is happening in America generally, as the rich grow richer, the poor poorer: a "trickle-up" economy in which a very few are siphoning wealth from others. Technology is not causing this wealth (and race) gap; it is making the gap visible. The students who arrive in our classrooms without access to new technologies are often students of color and generally the same students whose families have restricted access to health-care, legal services, good housing, and sometimes even adequate food.

Some Steps We Can Take

"OK, OK," we hear you say. "Enough! We see the inequality, we see that the gap is widening, we see that access to technology, as a function of wealth and race, is increasingly unequal. We see that our political leaders are feeding the techno-hype that makes us, and our students, and their parents and guardians, nervous unless we spend more of our diminishing school-resources on expensive high-tech. Tell us what we should do about this!" We are not wise enough to do so, but we have had a few thoughts.

Our first thought: we need to be aware of what is happening to wealth in our country, and to bring up this wealth gap and its relation to race whenever we can in conversations with colleagues and friends, and with our students in class discussions. Given the increasing wealth gap, do we really want more tax cuts? Do the fabled "Welfare Cadillacs" consume more of the nation's resources than the white-collar crime that led to the Savings and Loan bailout? Who do tax cuts advantage? The wealth-gap might become part of our curriculum: instead of presenting our economy as booming, we can see it as dividing. Let's use what we know, perhaps not to bring about the revolution, but to bring about the awareness which makes change possible. Let's read, too, Berliner and Biddle's *The Manufactured Crisis* and understand that our educational system is pretty good, and does not need to see technology as its last, best hope. There's no reason to panic.

If we are on the horns of a national dilemma—caught between the contending forces of technology and literacy, poverty and race—it is a dilemma that is of our own making, one that we can unmake. We can, through individual and collective action, work against the patterns and trends we have delineated here. Indeed, we must. Our responsibility, our obligation, as English studies and language arts teachers—if we truly believe that the education should provide equal opportunities for citizens in our country—is to pay attention and to act on behalf of students and the future they represent.

Works Cited

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