

Chapter 1.3

You Can't Step Into the Same Network Twice: Community Literacy, Client-Based Communication, and the Evolution of Networked (Re)Publics

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on experiences of creating a partnership between the University of South Florida St. Petersburg and a social service organization, Mt. Zion Human Services, Inc., the authors of this chapter moved from a plan for installing and directing a program of networking technologies—refurbished computers scavenged by professors, servers built from components by students, operating systems and software coded by the open-source programming community, and communications technologies that enable an open-source “bazaar” or ecology of writing in the client-based classrooms—to a plan for participating in and responding to the dynamics of the social and cultural networks that emerge vis-à-vis technology. This chapter describes the change in metaphor from building a network, which suggests control over this entity and its role in a public space, to participating in evolving networks, where the environment in which these networks may grow is cultivated, participation in that growth occurs as it develops with other participants, advocates, and organizations it is observed. Finally, the authors continued to participate in the engendering of new projects and networks that are grounded in the programmatic and core values.

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INTRODUCTION

When the University of South Florida St. Petersburg's (USFSP) writing program began a partnership with Mt. Zion Human Services, Inc. (MZHS), our diverse interests and energies converged around meeting the critical needs of midtown St. Petersburg, FL, an area with the highest levels of illiteracy, education failure, crime, violence, poverty, and substance abuse in Pinellas County (FL). We chose to work with Mt. Zion, in part, because of its work on these areas and our own interest in social justice, advocacy, and equality that are foundations of our teaching and research. Open-source technology was one vehicle through which we worked toward these goals and values in the communities with which we collaborated. The USFSP-MZHS partnership, informed by the Stanford model of service-learning, reinforces and grounds our vision of a community-based professional communications program and highlights the most important challenges, lessons and possibilities that adhere to our growth of both computer networks and the rhetorical and socially patterned space of teaching, community partnering and program-building that coalesce as a social imaginary that we have named "networked (re)publics." According to Ito (2007), a "networked public" is "a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media" (p. 2). Ito argues

"that technology does not stand apart as an external force that impacts society and culture. Rather, technologies are embodiments of social and cultural structures that in turn get taken up in new ways by existing social groups and cultural categories." (p. 3)

As these cultural, social and technological embodiments inherent in the pre-existing entities (in our case, USFSP writing program and Mt. Zion) co-develop, they redefine those convergences in unexpected ways. Drawing on Ito's "networked

publics" and what Lawrence Lessig (2001) calls the physical and code layers of any given network, we added the "(re)" to this concept for two reasons. First, the network we envisioned was to be comprised of re-purposed computers and open-source operating systems or software and introduced by students experimenting with open-source ethics and learning strategies. Second, in order to enact this experiment, our inquiry and pedagogy required an amplified attention to computer technology as described by Chris Kelty's (2008) concept of a "recursive public" as a dynamic social, cultural, and technological scene that "includes not only the discourses of a public, but the ability to make, maintain, and manipulate the infrastructures of those discourses as well" (p. 40). Rather than subsume computer-based technologies as tools in the service of the productive forces of discursive rhetorical practice, on the one hand, or position computer code, software or hardware as the material and prime mover of the discursively elaborated public sphere, on the other, Kelty's recursive public category intervenes on "the dichotomy between ideas and material practice" by focusing on the ways that

"geeks use technology as a kind of argument, for a specific kind of order: they argue about technology, but they also argue through it. They express ideas, but they also express infrastructures through which ideas can be expressed (and circulated) in new ways." (p. 29)

Using Kelty's premise that technologies are means of argument, our case study reports on the obstacles we met in trying to enact and unhinge from the idea that we can guide convergences and that we can use computer technologies to provide guidelines for the convergence. We initially believed that computer technologies and computer networks could stand as a metaphor and a means for creating social networks that would create and enhance communities. In a sense, we believed if we "built it," they—the local community—would

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