Chapter 5

Creating a Digital Support Center:
Foregrounding Multiliteracy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On a mid-sized university campus, the library proposes a new functional digital technology support service, and Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC) proposes a new critical and rhetorical digital support service; however, the collaborative process leading to the renovation of the library basement into a digital commons that will house these two differing digital centers has revealed missing, yet fundamental, questions about the purpose and structure of both services. Though building the digital commons could provide support in all three technological literacies, functional, critical, and rhetorical (Selber, 2004), decisions about the material aspects of the renovation preceded discussions of the theoretical foundations that necessarily inform mission and purpose and that should shape the work of the two centers. As a result, the collaboration has thus far produced an emphasis on only the first layer of technological literacy: creating functional users. The primary stakeholders' distance from the disciplinary knowledge of speaking and writing center scholarship combined with a lack of familiarity with recent trends in multiliteracy scholarship have resulted in a problematic disconnect between how the space should look and what the space should do.

THE PROBLEM: PUTTING PLANS BEFORE PURPOSE

The library's digital commons approach is consistent with the recent trend of universities collaborating across units to create centralized hubs for digital support and design. After surveying recent graduates, the library determined that there is a need on campus to provide support for digital project creation. McKinney (2010), drawing on Selber, describes the three types of technological literacies—functional, critical, and rhetorical—that directly inform the way support services could be structured:

Students who obtain functional literacy understand how to use hardware and software: they are proficient users *of technology. Students who obtain critical technology literacy understand the political, cultural, and economic ramifications of using technology; they are* critics *of technology. Rhetorical literary mediates between critical and functional literacy. Students with Rhetorical literacy know how to choose among competing technologies to achieve their rhetorical ends; they are the savvy* producers *of technology. (p. 209)*

Yet collaborations that produce these kinds of support can be rife with tensions that extend beyond the practical issues of space, funding, and staffing. In particular, the plan to build a hub that includes both functional support and critical and rhetorical support for students is oddly focused on logistics. Realizing the library's goal of creating a center that works with users on multimodal texts (including written, oral, and visual projects) that engage multiple literacies is not as simple as carving out physical space, securing funding, and adding technology.

Though new hubs cannot exist without these practicalities, the library's approach raises the following questions. What is the mission of such a "hub"? Is its goal to provide feedback? Correction? Dialogue? What are its theoretical foundations? Is collaboration fundamental? What informs its pedagogy? If learning is social in nature, how do the spaces provided create opportunities for such social interactions? What do stakeholders want students to accomplish in such a center? Do stakeholders and students even have the same goals? Is creating a digital support center a way to make assignments more legible for faculty? Does it enhance student learning? Is it merely a convenience?

In other words, a hub of this kind needs to have an underlying purpose, and this purpose comes from an understanding of its goals. The purpose and mission necessarily dictate what kinds of furniture the center will need to function best as well as what kind of walls need to surround the furniture, and the size of the rooms or cubbies that the walls must create. In his argument for advanced planning that would allow for preparedness should opportunities for new space arise, Inman (2010) states, "Too many times, designers work from a furniture catalog or tech-

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