"People Do What They Know":
Some Accounts of Participation
in Project UNLOC

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with Kathryn Weiss

The following is a series of accounts of Project UNLOC, as it unfolded from fall 1998 through early summer of 1999. I am not attempting here to tell one story, or even *a* story, if story is taken to mean a linear, cohesive, consistent piece. Rather, I have attempted to present narrative vignettes that involve not just accounts of the UNLOC experience through the eyes and ears of a variety of participants, but some also interpretation—and counterinterpretation—of those experiences. Of course, the number of accounts that might be offered of such a multi-faceted, multi-mediated, multi-participant event, taking place over several months, is myriad. Therefore, in this piece I will focus on accounts of participation, or the lack thereof, in the online interactions that took place over the life of the project. The accounts I present here, and the interpretations of them, are just some of the many that might have been presented.

Project UNLOC brought a group of scholars from multiple disciplines together to study the intersections of narration, literacy, and technology. The project included two symposia (referred to here as UNLOC 1 and UNLOC 2), an online discussion component, and publication of the *Works and Days* collection you are reading. All participants of both UNLOC 1 and UNLOC 2 were involved, via their participation in face-to-face and online communication, in the accounts here, although it should in no way be construed that participants have agreed with or 'signed on to' my construction of their experiences. As will be clear below, participants themselves provided vastly different accounts of the same events. Although I am grateful to all Project UNLOC participants, I would especially like to thank those who agreed to lengthy interviews: Gian

Pagnucci, Nick Mauriello, Ellen Barton, Radhika Gajjala, Lee Odell, Derek Owens, Dave Schaafsma, Catherine Smith, Myron Tuman, and Vershawn Young. All were extremely self-aware and candid, and were generous, forthright, and articulate in sharing their experiences. The interviews themselves provided, for me at least, some of the connection with other minds and lives that Project UNLOC was meant to provide. A final caveat: although I gathered a great deal of data (video and audio tapes of the two symposia, field notes, online interactions and correspondence, interviews, self-reflection) and although the accounts I present below are based on lengthy analyses of those data, the current piece should not be read as a report of research (which would need a much more exhaustive treatment of methods, procedure, and analysis) or as an assessment or evaluation of Project UNLOC.

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The numbers tell one story.

A total of 47 people attended the two Project UNLOC symposia, the first taking place in early October, 1998 and the second in mid-May, 1999. Thirty-four people attended UNLOC 1 in October, 31 attended UNLOC 2 in May, and 18 people attended both. One Asian woman attended both symposia, as did one Latino male. Two African-American men and two African-American women attended UNLOC 1. The remaining participants were White. Males made up 60% of the total participants, females, 40%. These proportions were about the same for UNLOC 1 (58% and 42%), but only 32% of the UNLOC 2 participants were women. Graduate students made up 34% of the total number of partici-pants, with the proportion of graduate students rising from UNLOC 1 (18%) to UNLOC 2 (39%).

Turnover from UNLOC 1 to UNLOC 2 was high: forty-seven per-cent of UNLOC 1 participants did not return. The proportions were higher for women: only 36% of the UNLOC 1 women returned, while 65% of the UNLOC 1 men returned. Two-thirds of the grad-uate students attending UNLOC 1 returned for UNLOC 2; half of the UNLOC 1 faculty returned for UNLOC 2. The 13 new partici-pants added for UNLOC 2 were about half faculty, half graduate students (six and seven, respectively), while eight of those 13 new participants were men.

Online communication took place between October and May, primarily via five web-based threaded discussion boards. (The dis-cussion boards were augmented in the spring by a list-serv distrib-uted to all participants via e-mail.) The threaded discussion boards consisted of an Open Forum for general discussion, and four topic-

specific boards, with topics generated by small groups at the October meeting: Methodology, Identity, Literacy, and History and Narrative. Over the seven-and-one-half month period between UNLOC 1 and UNLOC 2, 63 contributions were made to the discussion boards, by 18 different participants. (Excluded from this analysis were purely administrative posts, such as postings of discussion questions generated in small groups at UNLOC 1.) Participation on the History and Narrative discussion board and the Literacy discussion board was virtually non-existent, with only two non-administrative posts on the former and one on the latter. Discussion on the other three boards included seventeen non-administrative posts on the Methodology board, eighteen on the Open Forum board, and twenty-five on the Identity board.

A content analysis of the 63 non-administrative posts showed that 73% of the posts were content-based. That is, these posts concerned issues central to the symposia discussions, such as notions of authorship, discussions about the nature of cultures, or debates about the value of stories in cyberspace. Another 16% of the posts were categorized as 'process posts.' In these postings, participants reflected on their own participation in the UNLOC threaded discussion boards, apologized for not participating, or asked questions about the process of online participation in UNLOC. (Examples of some of these process posts about participation are analyzed below.) Posts about online participation in UNLOC (by the participants themselves) were coded as process posts, while discussions about online participation in other forums or in general were coded as content posts. Eight percent of the posts concerned technological problems or queries (usually about glitches in the software), and two percent of the posts were not able to be coded by this scheme.

The 63 non-administrative posts distributed over the 31 week period from early October to mid-May averages about 2.1 posts per week, but since online communications via the discussion boards effectively ceased in late-January–about 16 weeks after UNLOC 1—a more accurate average of postings per week is 3.9 over those 16 weeks. The average length of threads (an initial turn and any responses to that turn) on the boards was 3.3 turns–that is, an initial turn and 2.3 turns responding to that initial turn. Eight threads consisted on one unanswered thread each, and the longest were two threads of nine turns each, one on the Identity board and one on the Open Forum board. Eleven different individuals–or about 22% of all participants–initiated discussion threads.

Of the 47 total participants at the two symposia, eighteen—or 38%—participated in the online discussions on the threaded dis-

cussion boards, and five of those 18 made only one post each. Defining 'frequent posting' as three or more posts, only nine of 47 participants (19%) posted frequently. The group of eighteen online discussion participants consisted of 14 men and four women; that is, half of the male participants contributed to the online discussions, while only about one-quarter of the women did. Eighty-six percent of the 58 total online contributions were made by men and 14% by women, while 26% of these contributions were made by graduate students. Susan Herring's work on gender and online communication provides detailed analysis of (primarily White) women's participation in online discourse, and the gender proportions here are in keeping with what she and other sociolinguists have found in other online communities.

 I had originally planned to analyze the discussion board contributions based on the disciplinary affiliation of the contributor, but such an analysis proved to be impossible, as will be discussed in some detail in a later section.

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Some readers read impatiently through this number-based story of participation, some skip it altogether. Others–particularly if they were participants themselves– read closely, finding the numbers intriguing, or inexplicable, or entirely predictable. Mostly looking for holes.

Does one reader add the numbers to make sure the sums square? Does another run the proportions in her head? Does a third doubt the sense and trustworthiness of an author who counts things?

What do numbers say, anyway? And what do they mean? The numbers are 'written' by the analyst and they need a 'reader' as well to give them voice. As the researcher, the writer/reader of numbers and of stories, I offer here one brief narrative of the process by which I came to study Project UNLOC.

I come at the problem of online community building as an individual in whom fascination with and skepticism toward technology often wage war and sometimes find an uneasy truce. As someone who began graduate school at Carnegie Mellon University by telling then Graduate Director Richard Enos, "I'll come to CMU–as long as I don't have to do anything with computers." As someone who, later, in Professor Enos's own "Orality and Technology" seminar, encountered a tiny clay tablet and stylus and understood, holding those old and revered and exotic 'technologies' in her palm, that the matter of technology had always mattered. (What had been the matter with *me* that I hadn't understood this?) As

someone who faced life as an adult 'illiterate' in Japan, struggling to make sense of the differently configured material tools, signs, and spaces. As someone who thereby learned a bit, I hope, about the power of the material, about how even extensive book learning helps not a whit in a world one cannot read. As someone who has tried to learn how to watch. As a skeptic teacher who is often won over by student zealousness, and as a zealot teacher who is often brought up short by students' skepticism. As someone who has, I admit, sometimes self-righteously rolled her eyes at techno-hype, even as she remains intrigued by machines and those who build and use them.

I brought these interests and experiences, these fascinations and skepticisms with me to the first Project UNLOC symposium. There I heard the eclectic voices of a group of scholars who all had their own stories of fascination and of skepticism to share. I think it occurred to me in the first hour or so of that symposium that here–in this room, at this moment, with these people–was a project for inquiry. And so, with a strong propensity for people watching coupled with the learned behavior of an academic, I sat at the first symposium and mostly listened. Intrigued, fascinated, skeptical.

It was only later–with the encouragement of Project Co-Director Gian Pagnucci—that the idea to actually systematically observe and write about Project UNLOC came to fruition. The 'positioning' of the researcher is always awkward and fraught, but never more so for me than in this particular situation. My decision not to 'insert' myself in discussions meant that I was a 'lurker' in the online discussions in the most negative sense of that term–not a participant who hadn't yet found a voice, but a 'researcher' deliberately watching and deliberately mute. This awkwardness was exacerbated at UNLOC 2, where all symposium participants gave brief talks about their evolving projects. I made comments, I introduced a panel, but I remained mute on my own research project. Whether others at this second symposium noticed my silence, and how they interpreted it, I don't know.

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Not 'inserting' myself into the UNLOC discussions was a choice, a decision about researcher positioning that may have been made differently by others. Indeed, I myself have chosen different researcher "positions" in other projects. And, like so much else that we choose to do in scholarship–indeed, in life–it was a decision made from the gut: it just seemed like the right position to take in this case. But of course in another sense I had no choice: I was 'inserted' in the project from the very start–though my looking, my seeing, my listening.

         *   *   *   *

The voices in the online threaded discussions also give interpretation–and counterinterpretation–to the stories told by the numbers. The following accounts of participation are drawn from the online discussion threads themselves.

Some of these online accounts are predictions. Stories projected in time. Anticipatory accounts, based on other experiences in other contexts, as the anticipatory account provided in mid-October by Jim and David on the "Open Forum" thread. Despite a subject line that ostensibly looks back–"Symposium Afterthoughts"—the account is anticipatory: it indeed looks forward, not back, but it also expresses the excitement, optimism and newness that attaches, in common parlance at least, to the word 'anticipation.'

> From: David Downing & Jim Sosnoski
> Subject: Symposium Afterthoughts
> Posted: Wednesday, October 7, 1998 at 11:15:24
>
> _____
>
> We collaborate online because telecommunications help us to overcome the institutionalized 'patterned isolation' and the concomitant principles of 'field coverage' that Gerald Graff and Larence Veysey, among others, have so carefully documented as the organizing principles of university departments and specialized fields. The task we face is one of making electronic environments habitable for work in the humanities. We could use many examples here, but, for instance, we have found that the great usefulness of listservs in keeping us posted and in contact . . .
>
> Going online is best, from our experiences, when it isn't just a replacement for, but an enhancement of, f2f work and play. That's why we talk about _Works and Days_ as fostering hybrid, online collaborations . . .
>
> We now have a very flexible (because electronic spaces can easily be modified) electronic habitat where individuals with similar concerns can meet online. We have found that laying out such initial organizing structures is like an architect's initial efforts to design a building. We can now go to any or each of these

topics/rooms (as if the building had been completed) and expect to meet others from the project with similar interests. But, just like the architect (and unlike the building), since no cement has yet been poured, we can easily redesign the spaces/rooms to better meet needs if we so choose as we progress.

The eloquence of David and Jim's anticipatory account is found as well in Shaun's ruminations on "why have our students tell stories in cyberspace?"

From: Shaun
Subject: cyberstories
Posted: Wednesday, December 2, 1998 at 13:46:37

_____

I wonder if this is because of the newness of it all . . . are we doing these things because the possibility of what may be intrigues us . . . it is the newness of the equipment . . . or is it possibly the hope of breaking through the medium to find a new way to do things. I think the possibility of what may be is most intriguing. If we don't do the kinds of things that we are doing now and live through this silence will we miss the opportunity to find out what we can do further down the road . . . and isn't teaching partly about preparing students for what may be?

              *   *   *   *

Some readers look skeptically at such optimistic accounts. Realistic, possible? Or hyperbolic and a bit foolish? So "Dell and Compaq can sell more computers and Microsoft can sell more software" as Don put it, in a slightly different context? How intriguing and important is this technology–and its potential–to inner city kids? To abused women? Neglected children? An already over-burdened environmental ecosystem? Does our hyperbolic discourse about technology do anything to change social and material realities? If you're not part of the solution, are you part of the problem?

But anticipatory narratives can also inspire us, move us, remind us why we do this work. Such discourse propels us forward, to continue our work with technology, even though it can be tedious and frustrating–setting up network connections, troubleshooting software problems, making the case (yet again) to administrators

*about more machines—and must often be done in professional cli-
mates that are less than hospitable. Maybe these anticipatory
accounts–prophecies, in a sense–are necessary to inspire us to
keep moving.*

   *Prophetic accounts of the 'way things will be' often function to
build communities and to remind those communities of what they
share and hold most dear. Prophetic accounts help communities
or would-be communities envision a common enterprise. Martin
Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech was such an anticipatory
account. As Elizabeth Vander Lei and Keith Miller argue in a recent*
College English *essay, King's speech has served for almost 40 years
to galvanize a vision of community in the mainstream American
imagination, as evidenced by Bill Clinton's invocation of King in his
second inaugural: "Martin Luther King's dream was the American
Dream. His quest is our quest . . ." (quoted in Van der Lei and Miller
83). Van der Leigh and Miller suggest an even more deeply
ingrained and galvanizing context for King's prophetic discourse,
identifying it with the traditional jeremiad, a form of oral discourse
in which a prophet-outcast built and reinforced a common vision
of purpose within African American communities in the centuries
before King.*

   *Of course it would be laughable to equate a small group of priv-
ileged academics with the important movement for social justice
that King led, but the function of the anticipatory narrative in the
two cases may be somewhat similar.*

              *   *   *   *

   Even as the anticipatory accounts of the early Project UNLOC
discourses inspired the group, the phenomenologist wonders:
what does participation 'feel like,' in the lived experience of it?
What of accounts formed not before or after but *in medias res*?
What follows in this section are more accounts of participation.
These are talk-in-the-midst-of-things, the sometimes disjoint narra-
tives of work-in-progress.

          From: kathleen yancey
          Subject: stuff n' identity
          Posted: Sunday, November 1, 1998 at 18:12:18

          **ok, let me start with an apology (more apology: such
          bad form to start with an apology, but . . .). first, sorry
          for taking so long to get back to this . . .

From: Jeff
Subject: A deafening quiet
Posted: Sunday, November 15, 1998 at 16:28:29

Hmmm.

I believe this is the fourth time I've logged on to our group now. Each time I've felt guiltier about not participating more regularly. And each time I've logged off without posting.

Evidently, I'm not alone . . .

From: Susan Katz
Subject: A question about questions
Posted: Friday, October 16, 1998 at 16:38:26

. . . I confess I'm already feeling overwhelmed. I logged on to the site just now and looked to see who was talking—and felt like I had already fallen too far out of the loop to join in . . .

From: Gian
Subject: some ways to get rolling
Posted: Tuesday, November 17, 1998 at 10:11:57

I agree with Jeff that things are too quiet. So Nick and I have been strategizing some ways to get rolling . . . .

From: Don Byrd
Subject: This time
Posted: Saturday, November 21, 1998 at 01:47:55

I find the topics a little daunting. Perhaps we can get something going here, and move off to the individual forums . . .

I had a lovely time at the gathering, but it seems to me that we did not nail down a question. What are we talking about? . . . . I guess I want to know what we are supposed to be talking about?

From: Gian
Subject: collective authorship & turn taking
Posted: Monday, November 30, 1998 at 16:47:50

Well, I've enjoyed the discussion which has gone on so
far, though I wish more people were talking . . . .

At this point, I find myself wanting to hear from some-
one else. So I've written to a point of needing some dia-
logue . . .

From: jean clandinin
Subject:
Posted: Friday, January 15, 1999 at 12:51:01

I am finally trying to find a place in this conversation. I
apologize for my silence . . .

Note the repeated apologies, as if participants felt they were
'supposed to' be engaging in other activities. It seems that apolo-
gies signal a mismatch between perception and reality–between
the ways we perceive we are to behave and the ways we actually
do behave. The expectations here–implied in the apologies for
silence–seem to have been for dialog, talk, action. Many partici-
pants, sensing that they were not performing up to 'expectations,'
felt 'guiltier' each time, and ended up offering apologies. Some of
these apologies referenced the 'daunting' task that the discussion
boards represented and how 'overwhelmed' participants felt.

*   *   *   *

*But are these accounts at all? Are they just gritching, excuses, at
best random musings of a group that can't quite gel? And what is
the function of such discourse, if the function of anticipatory
accounts is to inspire? Are these in-process accounts just gestures,
verbal nods and winks, handwaving, a way to save the collective
face of a group that isn't meeting its own expectations?*

*Or, maybe participants' in-process accounts reflect the messiness
and frustration and doubt that characterizes much human activity,
even (or especially?) meaningful activity. Maybe the apologies and
frustrations and 'gritching' are another way that community is built.
The verbalization and sharing of problems reminds individuals
within a group of what they hold in common–not just dreams and
visions but the day to day tedium and toil of real, hands-on work.
One need only think back to graduate school to remember how*

tedium and toil, and the telling of tedious and toilsome tales, can form community bonds that time and distance cannot loosen.

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Humans are meaning-making creatures. Inductive, theorizing creatures. Many in-process accounts of participation–especially those that expressed dissatisfaction with the online interactions, or lack thereof–were followed by a kind of explanation, a theoretical accounting, an answer to a 'why' question. The explanations that participants provided of their own and others' lack of participation are underlined in the following excerpts.

Jeff's theorizing is overt, as he wonders aloud why the free-end-less-about-anything talk at UNLOC 1 has now become a 'deafening silence.'

>
> From: Jeff
>
> Hmmm.
>
> I believe this is the fourth time I've logged on to our group now. Each time I've felt guiltier about not participating more regularly. And each time I've logged off without posting.
>
> Evidently, I'm not alone.
>
> *Six weeks now and only a handful of messages. What is it, I wonder, that's keeping this 'conversation' from taking off?…*
>
> *. . . Is there something interesting to say about this very conspicuous quiet? Maybe it's just a simple matter. Maybe it's just too much of a hassle to log in, scan the threads, and think of something smart to say. Maybe we don't particularly like the ways the page is organized-it's certainly not intuitive to me where I fit in here..*
>
> *But maybe it's something more interesting. To me, there's just something less compelling about the medium. We like to pretend it's just conversation. But it's not. Looking over some of the current threads, it looks like I'm supposed to sound a lot smarter here than that. I need to cite some heady sources, post some deep and unanswerable questions. But for all that work—it's a lot*

like writing an article, I think—there just doesn't seem to
be much pay back. So I just put it off till next time . . .

Jeff floats several explanations: design of the software and cite organization; something less compelling about the medium–it's *not* like conversation; the need to 'sound smart'; lack of payback. Susan feels the press of current deadlines, and Gian seems to imply that it's lack of leadership and direction, or the lack of manage-ability in the task itself.

From: Susan Katz

. . . I confess I'm already feeling overwhelmed. I logged on to the site just now and looked to see who was talk-ing—and felt like I had already fallen too far out of the loop to join in . . . *Perhaps when I have met the crush of current deadlines I will find the time to contribute.*

From: Gian

I agree with Jeff that things are too quiet. *So Nick and I have been strategizing some ways to get rolling which may make it more manageable for people . . . .*

Jeff revisits the question, clarifying that he doesn't mean to gripe, and restates his original question.

From: Jeff
Subject: Gian's proposal
Posted: Wednesday, November 18, 1998 at 10:34:14

. . . Looking back, I'm a bit concerned I came off as griping about non-participation (my own included). That was not my intention. Rather, I mainly wanted to raise what seems to me an interesting conceptual ques-tion: is there something about the medium itself that would transform such a talkative, opinionated group into practical mutes?

*   *   *   *

Jeff's interesting conceptual question never has any takers.
Perhaps it's unrealistic to expect people to provide cogent theoret-
ical accounts–or even be much interested in theorizing–while they
are in the throes of work. Indeed, one of the characteristics of

meaningful labor is that we are mindful of little but the activity in which we are engrossed, an activity whose shape and character often defy and deny verbal descriptions. As Hayes and Flower argued cogently over a decade ago (in describing verbal protocols of writers), the utterances of those in the throes of work are not accounts–they are tantalizing bits of experience from which inter-pretations might be built–much like the glimpses of a porpoise above the water might help us piece together his journey under the surface. And, in his fascinating study, The Hand, *Frank Wilson sug-gests how most of the actions of the hand, this very useful and ubiquitous, yet humble, human organ, escape verbalization: try to describe what your hands are doing as you wash dishes or tie a shoe. The body, especially the body at work, knows what the voice can never say.*

But certainly people can theorize about their own activity. Self-reflection is in fact one of the qualities we have traditionally claimed to value and to encourage in ourselves and in our students. However, self-reflection often happens after the fact, as in the fol-lowing accounts by individuals involved in Project UNLOC. Provided three to five weeks after UNLOC 2, the participation nar-ratives provide further elaboration and depth (as well as some counter-interpretation) to the accounts of Project UNLOC.

I conducted ten extended interviews with Project UNLOC par-ticipants, either over the phone or face to face, between mid-May and early June, 1999. I selected interview participants to roughly represent the political and disciplinary interests, the genders, ages, ranks, and ethnicity of the attendees at the Project UNLOC sym-posia. Specifically, I interviewed eight faculty members and two graduate students; seven men and three women; eight Whites, one Asian-American, and one African-American. Of the faculty mem-bers, three were assistant professors and five were associate or full professors. I also tried to choose individuals who represented a range of 'levels of participation' in the online discussions: that is, I selected some who had contributed relatively frequently, some who had contributed not at all, and some who had contributed occasionally.

In the sections that follow, I do not reveal names or demograph-ic characteristics of contributors. My decision to protect anonymi-ty was based on the desires of a majority of participants, many of whom indicated that they would be more comfortable if they knew their identities would not be directly tied to their comments. I agreed in principle with one participant who noted that anonymi-

ty often results in the silencing of counter-stories, especially if stories come from those whose voices have traditionally been marginalized due to gender, ethnicity, or rank.   Certainly it is true that the stories of the powerful are often the stories that get told—'history is written by the victors,' after all. My intention was to represent all 'versions' of the Project UNLOC story as best I could, while at the same time following the desire for anonymity that most interview subjects seemed to prefer.

The interviews were loosely based on a method described by Pollio, Henley, and Thompson as 'the phenomenological interview.'   Phenomenological interviews, as Pollio, Henley, and Thompson describe them, are less question-and-answer than they are a conversation about a common concern, event, or experience. Since I had been a part of Project UNLOC from the beginning, an interview methodology that allowed me to take advantage of my own participation in the events and experiences of Project UNLOC seemed appropriate.

The interviews themselves, averaging just under two hours each in length, covered a range of topics, but I will focus below on participants' accounts of participation, particularly online participation. Four of the ten Project UNLOC participants that I interviewed did not take part at all in the online threaded discussion groups, and two of those four indicated that they had not planned to participate online even during the first face-to-face symposium. Others indicated that they had intended, in a vague sort of way, to participate, but then didn't, as in these two examples:

> And I did not participate in the electronic stuff. I wasn't all that busy, but I didn't know, what was, I don't know, I guess I'm sort of reticent and old fashioned. Ah, I like what they set up in theory, but . . .

> You know, I meant to get to it [the Web site and discussion boards], but I never did. I looked at it a few times, but things, well for some reason I just didn't respond. I'm a little embarrassed about that now, saying it.

Several people reported initial excitement, after UNLOC 1, to contribute to the online discussions, but lost their enthusiasm, as in this example:

> I really welcomed the opportunity to converse with people in the field . . . . But I did get online and start-

ed conversing with people and having conversations, and they were not very responsive, I don't think . . . . I thought there were some very good things that were said, and I probably would have gotten more involved had I had the notion that people would be invested in the conversation. But I didn't see that, so I sort of exited.

In order to contribute to an online discussion, members probably need some sort of investment, as the individual above suggests, an investment not just in the topic or the conversation, but in the group as a whole. When queried about whether the Project UNLOC group constituted an 'intellectual community,' (one of the stated goals of the project directors), one interview participant said:

No, I don't think so. The proof of that would have been if you had had thriving conversations going on between UNLOC 1 and UNLOC 2.

This individual, who responded to three of the four discussion threads and who seemed to be a relatively active contributor, described his experiences this way:

Well, I don't think I was a presence [online]. There were actually a few months that went by that I didn't even have a computer. I had no computer . . . for several months. But when I finally got it back, got back on, I had been made aware of that fact that people hadn't been contributing a whole lot. And so I was really, "Geez, these guys [the project directors] have done so much work . . . ." Guilt is a certain part of it.

It may speak to the paltriness of the online discussion that an individual who was without a computer 'for several months' was still a relatively active presence online. The 'guilt' that this individual alludes to was shared by a number of participants, whether they contributed regularly or not. Another person summarizes what many characterized as the failure of the online discussions this way:

I have Calvinist guilt about doing things that I've committed to doing. And when Gian and Nick prodded us a few times, in October, November, December, I did log

on. There *is* evidence that I did participate [laughter]. In responding to some questions. But there was very little to respond to . . . . I actually decided to start asking some questions. And then, because of my earlier problems with using Web sites only when I have time, I–there were even some responses to questions that I had asked that I didn't get back to for weeks. So it didn't work very well for me. It certainly seemed that it didn't work well for anybody. There were three or four very active participants for a little while, it seemed to me. But it was a complete failure, almost a complete failure. I felt like it just wasn't the choice of interacting that people would have made. It just didn't seem to work for us as a way of extending the face to face conversations that we had.

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What happened? Here are 40+ highly-trained, technologically savvy academics, most of whom make their living, at least in part, by using and teaching others to use literacy technologies. Who spend their time advocating the use of electronic technologies in higher education, or at least taking advantage of the presence of that technology within their institutions. Yet these same individuals don't take advantage of the computer tools set up for their group communication, do not have the time, or the need, or the inclination to use one of the kinds of technologies that they encourage students to use. Is this a fluke? Or an irony? Some sort of sham?

<div align="center">*   *   *   *</div>

Probably not. Elsewhere ("On the Relationship of Old and New Technologies") I have argued for a complex view of literacy technologies that acknowledges the myriad factors that contribute both to technological development and use and to technological 'success' and 'failure.' The work of Dutch technology theorist Wiebe Bijker is particularly useful in understanding the historical, cultural, interpersonal, and material constraints and circumstances that have gone into shaping our technological worlds. More specifically, two decades of research on computer-mediated communication suggests that communication online is complex, multifaceted, inherently contradictory. So it is probably naïve to assume that this large group of geographically distributed and diverse individuals would seamlessly adapt to an imposed communications technology and use it 'successfully' in as short a period as six months. Consider the complexity of the communication situation: the multitude of cultural identities at play; the variety of social, psycholog-

ical, and material constraints; the long and complicated histories of the individuals and institutions associated with Project UNLOC; the myriad goals, activities, commitments, constraints, and desires that make up the lives of each individual involved.

Some of these complexities are echoed by the interviewed individuals themselves, who all had their own explanations for 'what happened'–explanations grounded in specific ways to their own experiences.

The design of the technology may have contributed to a lack of participation, as several individuals found it difficult to use.

> It [lack of online communication] actually had to do with that this was a Web site. It takes a matter of seconds, a couple of clicks to get there. But even that is–if it had been a listserv, if people had actually been getting e-mail coming to them, instead of going to the source—that might have had something to do with it.

> It [the Project UNLOC Web site] seemed confusing to me, the way it was set up. . . . Logging on initially, there were problems. And I couldn't figure out exactly what to do.

> One thing is that the way that the listserv [sic] was set up was not very conducive to a conversation. Because you first of all had to sign on, and use your password, and your code, and so forth. So that's one thing. And then once you did that, you had to then go into a specific category and then you had to click on a name, and the title made no–so it was just too much.

However, the individual who made the last comment went on to suggest that, while technological design may have been important, in his view other factors contributed as well.

> So it wasn't completely the technology, although the technology had a part in why there wasn't much consistency [in participation]. But then again, it may have been just, "What's the point?" [laughter] in having this discussion? I mean, what was this leading to? There wasn't a moderator so to speak, to keep this on track and to say, OK, this is why we're having this discussion, this is why it's important. To remind us what we did at

> the first symposium. Because people just don't want to spend a lot of time, you know, just sitting down at the computer formulating their thoughts, you know, if there's really no point to sharing it.

This individual is attributing the lack of participation to factors in the immediate situation–the lack of leadership, motivation, and 'point' for the discussion. Another respondent also attributed the lack of participation to factors in the communications situation, specifically the mix of individuals involved, their knowledge and commitment to online communication.

> I was actually blown away by how much silence there was, so many spaces where somebody hadn't initiated a conversation or followed up . . . there's time, I'm involved in e-mail correspondence in which it really just, you can't stop it, it goes for weeks and you have lots of material. And that wasn't happening here, and I still think it comes back to the initial symposium, not the right group in many respects. I think there were a lot of people who just weren't sure how to communicate. That could have been avoided if there had been a way to find out who should be a part of all this, and who were the people that were not averse to that kind of correspondence.

Yet another participant projected beyond the immediate Project UNLOC situation and attributed his own lack of participation to the general nature of online forums. He believed that online communication in general did not provide the kind of pointed comments and challenges that he needed when he was producing an article or presentation.

> What I really want to work on something, I want to hear people who will specifically challenge what I've said, or who will say things that complement or extend what I'm doing. And a lot of times, my prejudice is that I don't want to go back to online bull sessions.

The above comments suggest that a constellation of factors–the technological configurations as well as factors in the communicative situation—contributed to the lack of participation in the Project UNLOC online discussions.

Undeniably, communicative and technological factors shaped the participation in Project UNLOC. However, some of the most compelling explanations voiced in the interviews focused on the larger material, professional, and disciplinary contexts in which work gets done.

This participant lamented the professional and material constraints that he and all writers face. The unwritten books, the unanalyzed data, the unfinished articles, all "falling by the wayside" in the face of day to day constraints of time.

> I'm gonna guess that all of us have ten, twelve possible projects working and you know there'll all out there. These are books we could write, these are articles we could write, you know. They are all out there, and we're making choices and the ones that are less well defined, where leadership isn't present, those are the ones that are gonna fall by the wayside. 'Cause even the ones that are well-defined in my life, some of them aren't going to get done. If I stopped teaching now, and stopped going to any committee meetings for a while, maybe ten years from now, a couple of those projects would get done.

Another participant put it somewhat differently, talking not about time constraints but about the material presence of others and the attendant pressure accompanying such presence.

> For me, it's just kind of a material presence. Unless somebody's bugging me–it's like, "This is interesting," but then there's a graduate student at my door and a collaborator on the phone and you just–anything just falls to the bottom of the queue that isn't beating on my door for attention.

Finally, the following interview subject wondered if people simply revert to habit, or what they know, especially under the press of time.

> I think that people, given time or given the lack of time, will take the safer route, the more, the route they are socialized to. They'll do what they know.

People do what they know. By all accounts, the UNLOC project was an ambitious one, challenging participants and pushing at the

borders of disciplines, of genre, and of the conventions of academic work. What are the implications for people 'doing what they know' in Project UNLOC, whose ostensible purpose was to push beyond 'what we know' to form new communities, new projects, and new knowledge?

One of the goals of Project UNLOC was the forging of new, interdisciplinary collaborations. The notion that 'people do what they know'—or only what they know—flies in the face of such a goal. What was the fate of interdisciplinary work in Project UNLOC? One rather crude measure of the depth of interdisciplinarity would be to examine the formation of new collaborative groups as a result of Project UNLOC. Interestingly, only one of the collaborative pieces that finally appeared in this *Works and Days* issue represented new collaborations; the vast majority of individuals co-authoring pieces in this volume had all worked together in some capacity before.

 I had initially wanted to compare participation rates (as reported early in this piece) for different disciplinary groups, but this proved more difficult than I had thought. For while the project directors had a sense of the disciplinary affiliation of the participants they chose, the participants themselves were much less clear. Many indicated that they weren't sure which of the three 'groups' (narrative, technology, or literacy) they were meant to represent. Others saw themselves working in all three areas, or in none of the three. Several individuals characterized themselves as representing different disciplines than the directors had imagined those individuals representing. Neither was the identification of departmental affiliation particularly useful: education schools, departments of communication, and English departments might all have scholars working in narrative, technology, or literacy.

I then turned to the Project UNLOC discourse itself to see what it revealed about interdisciplinary collaborations. My colleague Kathryn Weiss and I found that there was, in fact, an interesting tension between the different forms of discourse that took place and how 'interdisciplinary collaboration' was represented in those discourses. We examined what we labeled the 'official,' 'public,' and 'private' discourses of Project UNLOC.

Official discourses were those produced by the project organizers as they described the project and its goals in letters to potential contributors, in the published texts distributed at each symposia, and in 'official' communications about the symposia to outsiders. Discourse contributed to the online threaded discussion was

included in the category of 'official' discourse if it seemed to be coming from the project directors as directors, rather than as participants. 'Public' discourses we identified as utterances of project participants that occurred in the online forums or in the face-to-face meetings of the two symposia–utterances, in other words, that were accessible to all project participants. (However, only the online discourse was analyzed here.) And 'private discourse' is discourse about Project UNLOC that was shared between two or more participants but not accessible to everyone in the group. There were presumably myriad discussions and conversations about Project UNLOC that I was not privy to, some that I was; the 'private' discourse analyzed here was that discourse that comprised the face-to-face and phone interviews I conducted with a subset of ten participants.

   It should be clear that in using the terms 'public' and 'private' Kathryn and I were not attempting to reproduce reified theoretical categories, but rather to use the terms *relationally*. That is, we see the interview conversations as more private than the online discussions. Those online discussions are, in turn, more 'public' than casual conversations over lunch that might have taken place at the symposia. In no way are we claiming that any of the specific communications situations we examined met some abstract theoretical criteria for 'public' or 'private,' criteria which would be highly suspect in any case. (I have written on the myriad interpretations of 'public' and 'private' in "Materializing Public and Private: The Spatialization of Conceptual Categories in Discourses of Abortion.")

   In the 'official' discourses of Project UNLOC, the organizers made it clear that interdisciplinary collaboration was one of the goals–and one of the clear benefits–of the project. For example, the Symposium One Agenda indicated, "The spirit of this event is to encourage scholarly collaboration and community building." In the Project Timeline, outlined in the Symposium One 'Sketch Book,' the project directors are explicit about their goals *vis a vis* interdisciplinary collaboration: "We've invited participants from a range of fields in the hope that some unique collaborative works might also be generated that cross traditional disciplinary boundaries." In the same Symposium One 'Sketch Book' there was an entire section titled "Collaborative Scholarship" and this section too reflects the project directors' hopes about interdisciplinary collaboration as they invite participants to "join a select group of scholars in a collaborative exploration of the intersections of nar-

ration, literacy, and technology." They go on to say that *Works and Days* is "dedicated to encouraging collaborative research projects the engage both disciplinary and post-disciplinary perspectives." Further, 'interdisciplinarity' is one of the clear themes of another 'official discourse,' the opening page of the Project UNLOC Web site. Here, interdisciplinarity is the 'topic' of fully ten percent of the discourse. (That is, there are approximately 1350 words of prose on this opening page and 136 of those occur in sentences whose 'topic' is interdisciplinarity.)

Given the importance of interdisciplinarity in these official Project UNLOC discourses, it is somewhat surprising that this topic is virtually absent from the public, online discussions conducted over the life of the project. Although participants were fairly frank about their personal struggles with other issues–teaching challenges and negotiating technology, for instance–they remain almost completely silent on the topic of scholarly interdisciplinary collaborations. On the Open Forum thread there was some communication about online collaboration, but these discussions centered on students' responses to online collaboration or on teachers' attempts to foster it. There is no mention at all of the Project UNLOC participants' experiences as scholars with interdisciplinary collaboration. (There was one reference to interdisciplinary collaboration in the opening entry of the "Open Forum" thread, but–because that entry was an extended 'anticipatory' discourse written by one of the project directors, we categorized it as an instance of 'official' discourse.)

So, while there was generally laudatory treatment of interdisciplinary collaboration in the official discourse, there was a marked silence on the topic in the online forums. This silence was 'broken' in the 'private' interviews with participants, where (upon being asked to comment on the Project Directors' goals for interdisciplinary collaboration) half of the interview subjects spoke rather negatively about the idea or the experience or both. Several directly addressed the discomfort and difficulties they had in working with people from other disciplines. Some claimed that they felt out of place or 'outnumbered:' "I was a little disappointed there were so many comp people," said one participant. Another said, "There are a number of people who were there that weren't that interested in what we did . . . . One person [had in another context] . . . attacked . . . some of the things we stand for."

Others observed that working across boundaries required time and effort they didn't have. "Look, I've got X many hours in the day. I'm going to sit down and follow the random visions of [this

group of people]?" asked one participant incredulously. Later, he said forthrightly, "I don't want to [find new collaborators]. I'm already up to my nose in collaborations." While interview participants were generally positive about the organization of the symposia, there were some complaints, and one recurring theme in some of these complaints concerned a 'lack of focus' for the project generally and for Symposium One in particular: "I didn't see where it [Symposium One] was going," "Mostly it [Symposium One] was haggling over the process," "Symposium One was all over the map." Presumably this 'lack of focus' has something to do with the organizers' attempts to bring several strands of research together in one symposium. Such attempts could easily been perceived as resulting in a 'lack of focus,' particularly for scholars used to working with people in their own disciplines.

It is a common lament from scholars that 'institutional' barriers inhibit collaborations within academia. However, a closer look at the 'failure' of interdisciplinary collaboration in Project UNLOC suggests that the barriers to collaboration may extend beyond institutional and disciplinary constraints; it may be that individual scholars are in fact less interested in collaboration than our 'official' discourses might suggest.

The tenor of the online discussions and the professional affiliations of co-authors of chapters in this volume suggest that the goal of interdisciplinary collaboration was not met. This 'finding' seemed to be borne out in comments of interview subjects; while they generally characterized Project UNLOC on the whole as successful and represented their own experiences as useful and rewarding, most also agreed that the cross disciplinary communications that were meant to happen on the threaded discussion boards simply didn't. But one interview subject, a dissenting voice, quarreled with the notion that the Project UNLOC discussion boards were a 'failure.'

> Well, who's to say what's a failure? Is lots of talk automatically 'success'? You don't really know what people take away, and there's no way you can say that just because there wasn't a lot of activity that people weren't participating.

When presented with this idea, another individual concurred:

> You're right. We've been talking about this as if success would be everybody talking. It's sort of an assumption

about silence that might be, that's useful to bring up. We think in a discussion that–it's sort of common sense to say that people who aren't speaking, that, well they weren't engaged. But we know that listening is a form of engagement.   There are other ways to be engaged–that's right.

So does participation require contributions? Could we say that Project UNLOC participants were 'participating' in the online discussions even when silent? What constitutes engagement in this forum? These questions are beyond the scope of the current piece, but a trip to the OED–the language scholar's favorite trope–reveals that the word 'participate' can mean both to 'partake in' and to 'share' something. If by participate, we mean to take something away, then silence is a way to participate, and may have been a form of participation in the Project UNLOC online discussions. However, if by participate, we mean to share, then a verbal contribution to the online discussion would be necessary to constitute participation. This points to a distinction that may need to be made between *participation as a practice of individuals* and *participation as contributing to a group enterprise*. Certainly, an individual could 'partake' in the online discussions through silent reading and observation, without ever 'speaking' in the online forum. But participation in a group enterprise–in this case, Project UNLOC, with its goals of building both a community and a body of knowledge— would require individuals to share their ideas, articulate their positions, and give voice to their own experiences. Such participation would require moving beyond (or around) technological, material, and professional constraints; it would require discarding or at least bracketing inculcated habits, familiar practices, and traditional ways of working. 'People do what they know'–and what they know has a powerful, conserving effect on how–and even whether—academic work can be refigured in the twenty-first century.

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PROJECT

*Understanding
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Works
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