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Grabill, Jeffrey T. Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action.

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Grabill, Jeffrey T. *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2007. ISBN: 1572737638.

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As new forms of writing and research technologies are developed and disseminated for widespread public use, the field of community literacy is one that increasingly involves technological literacy¹. The fields of community literacy, computers and writing, and community informatics are thus merging, and more interaction needs to occur between members of these fields so as to develop productive knowledge frameworks. In *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action*, Jeffrey Grabill provides an explanation and an illustration of how and why these fields are important to one another. This becomes clear as in the book's six chapters Grabill investigates the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) by citizens, the literacies citizens struggle to develop in relation to ICTs, and the causal problems they have in competing against the power of institutions in their work to enact community change.

Grabill argues that “we—as researchers, teachers, citizens—have failed to understand rhetorical work in communities *as work*” (2). In his book he “attempts to understand the work of citizenship and imagine the support necessary for this work” (2). Grabill positions his arguments in the first and second chapters, stating that the work of citizens in communities is “knowledge work” equal to that required in businesses and schools, though it is not as well supported as it is in such institutions. He defines “knowledge work” as being analytical and requiring problem solving and abstract reasoning—such as the research and writing done by citizens—and the use of ICTs, which include digital technologies such as computer networks, databases, cell phones, and PDAs. Grabill sees this work as cooperative, even collaborative, in community settings. Grabill's purpose, then, is to take a deeper look into the work that citizens do in community settings and to see it as a type of rhetorical work, thereby building a theory of civic rhetoric for community members who write with ICTs, including students, “the civic rhetors of the 21st century” (3).

Grabill has two main foci in constructing his theory. First, he investigates and describes the everyday work of citizens and communities and their use of writing technologies in order to provide fields related to writing and technology with more awareness of such information. Second, he evaluates the design, or infrastructures, of ICTs—specifically information databases—and how they can be improved for citizen use by decreasing “indirect exclusions,” such as inaccessible infrastructures and usability issues.

Throughout the third and fourth chapters, Grabill uses two of his longitudinal research studies to investigate and illustrate how people actually work in communities. In particular, he examines the infrastructure and “the relationship between more (expert) and less (nonexpert) powerful actors” (4) to technology. Grabill’s fieldwork takes the form of action-research as he attempts to work *with* people in communities to find solutions to their problems, rather than conducting research *on* them. The first study, which Grabill co-researched with Stuart Blythe, involves a two-year risk-communication project in an industrial Michigan town. The town was working on a pollution problem when Grabill and Blythe were brought in as communications specialists by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to evaluate and navigate the communication problems between the “experts” (such as the EPA and U.S. Army Corps) and the community groups working in Harbor, Michigan. The community groups had to “do science” on their own without institutional support, since they did not trust the information provided to them by the “outsiders.” The lack of support and the distrust interfered with effective communication and community problem-solving. In their action-research, Grabill and Blythe attempted to remedy the problem in the public meeting, for which they designed a new infrastructure, one that delivered the research to be presented to citizens before meetings and shortened the length of presentations by experts. This ultimately allowed community members greater opportunity to comprehend, question, and discuss the expert research, thus enabling their greater participation in the issue. One major result of the study, then, was that it illustrated the “potentially transformative possibility of new infrastructures” (98), which is a central tenet of Grabill’s second research project as well.

The second study Grabill describes is the Capital Area Community Informatics (CACI) project that he and a team worked on for three years. The project was based on a Lansing, Michigan Web resource, “CACVoices,” which was created to provide information and data for citizen use. However, the resource did not have much impact due to usability and usefulness problems inherent in the database’s infrastructure, particularly its interface and demand for expert users. Grabill’s study attempted to revise the infrastructure to make it more accessible to all users, particularly community activists. “While Grabill acknowledges that locating an interface design problem might seem like an obvious strategy to those with experience in usability or web design, he argues that these types of usability issues are not often apparent in community settings because the organizations or government agencies who create the databases and websites do not take into consideration citizen use.”

The last two chapters of *The Technology of Community Action* focus on how technical and institutional infrastructure can be designed to better support invention in communities and prepare citizens for writing situations they will encounter. In considering the design of an infrastructure, Grabill argues for the development of “*metis* capable infrastructure” (91) to support the knowledge work of citizens. Grabill understands *metis* as a particular type of local, practical knowledge developed from experience, and he draws on

several theorists—Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vermant’s *Les ruses de l’intelligence: la métis des Grecs*, Janet Atwill’s *Rhetoric Reclaimed: Aristotle and the Liberal Arts Tradition*, and Robert Johnson’s *User-Centered Technology: A Rhetorical Theory for Computers and other Mundane Artifacts*—who view *metis* as “enabling the less powerful or capable of reversing relations and practices of power” (92). In calling for the recognition and valuing of *metis*, Grabill is urging the importance of nonexpert knowledge, especially for invention purposes in infrastructure design, which can help promote the accessibility and usability of ICTs. Grabill recommends planning for and with human subjects in mind, and developing “*metis*-friendly institutions” that encourage the participation of users (93). He also calls for teachers of writing to begin creating and developing such infrastructure, noting that they are in a good position to write infrastructures that “foster more effective use in communities” (106) of writing technologies and ICTs. Further, Grabill rejects current institutional models of writing programs and instead supports the creation of explicitly public and civic writing programs. He argues that students are and should be regarded as citizens, and thus teachers should “understand the writing required to be an effective citizen as work—as knowledge work—and teach the rhetoric necessary to do that work” (114).

Writing Community Change thus highlights the importance of merging the spheres of expert and nonexpert to enable greater citizen agency in enacting democratic change. Grabill makes a particularly compelling case in his call for the reformation of writing programs, a step that could help narrow the gap between universities and communities—work that community literacy has traditionally been invested in. This book can be of substantial use to anyone interested in the fields of community literacy, writing and computers, technical communications, and/or the emerging field of community informatics. As intended, it can also be useful to activist citizens working in communities, as well as those interested in access and usability issues in web design in community settings, community organizations working with ICTs, and instructors who are interested in democratic and civic pedagogies.

NOTE

1. Many thanks to Heidi McKee for her comments on revisions of this review.

