

An Illinois Sampler: Talking about Teaching on the Prairie

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Final chapter:

CyberNavigating by Kate Williams

When she and I met, Chicagoan Alicia Henry was a mother raising her son in Englewood, where she herself grew up. While earning her a bachelor's degree in psychology from Chicago State University, she also worked as cybernavigator at the West Englewood branch of Chicago Public Library. She helped people using the public access computers, providing just-in-time help and small pre-arranged classes. Figure 1 shows her with a patron who came back to share news of her high school graduation. Alicia is a patient person who laughs a lot, including when she said, "Some days after my shift I be running out the back door hiding, patrons steady after me!" Alicia was also an important guide for me in my research on local communities in the digital age.



Figure 1. Alicia Henry, right, with a patron in Chicago Public Library.

When what you are studying is changing rapidly, teaching has to stick close to the latest research. My own research focuses on how everyday people and community-based institutions are “cybernavigating” their way in the digital age. Entirely new ways of working and living are emerging. Everywhere people

are striving to catch up with powerful institutions which have already made the leap. The only way for students to understand this new phenomenon is to leave campus and talk and work with real people, much as I do in my research.

Before describing how we do this, I must say that the University of Illinois is an ideal place to do this work. For starters, a land grant institution is about working with people in local communities to make sure they're on top of new technologies, whether that's farming methods or using Google and Wikipedia. "Learning and labor" is our university's motto. Our early library school education featured a half day learning in the classroom and a half day working in a library. This made sense in the 1800s when libraries were changing dramatically from small, elite book collections to mass institutions for learning and leisure.

But there's more. Illinois is actually world-famous in my own field of community computing, also known as community informatics. Before I even came to work here, I had heard about PLATO—the time sharing computer system invented here in 1961 that was free and open to interested members of the public. The public proceeded to create online courses, play games with each other, use early versions of chat and email and more. They had so much fun with PLATO that when I convened a day long symposium, Fifty Years of Public Computing at Illinois, folks came out again—brought a 40 pound metal hard drive 2 feet across for show and tell, told stories and enjoyed themselves. By the 1980s, Urbana Free Library was the first public library to connect remotely to a university catalog—you could find and reserve books by computer. By the 1990s, two library school faculty had mobilized people across the two towns to make use of Prairienet, an updated form of PLATO accessed via the Internet, hosting websites and discussion lists and making all of C-U a technology-savvy place, not just "North of Green Street" as we call the engineering campus. These encouraging experiments were running parallel to Illinois inventing the touch screen, the browser, and all the other engineering feats of U of I. Our campus is uniquely community-informatics-savvy.

The particularities of the library school here are also felicitous for this work. Prairienet was for ten years a center of research, teaching, and service: recycling computers, offering low cost dialup service, teaching basic computer classes, and fostering other networks such as SinnFree in Rockford. Cybernavigating is only the latest focus for community informatics at Illinois, and is melded more tightly with today's core library services.

So when it comes to the current wave of technological change in local communities around the world, how does teaching link to research exactly?

Cybernavigating is the central assignment in LIS 518 Community Informatics (CI), the required course for a CI certificate and an elective in the Masters in Library Science program offered at U of I. I help students make a connection with a library, and they then volunteer there for part of the semester, helping people on the computers. Some students do this here in Champaign-Urbana. Others do it in cities and towns all the US and Canada, because they are enrolled in our award-winning distance education program. And still others have done it in their native China, when I have taught summer

school at Peking University. So far, all public libraries are like Chicago's—people beat a path to the cybernavigators just to be able to function in today's digital society.

As the students work, they write field notes. After they finish, they use those field notes to write about their challenges, their breakthroughs, and their reflections on the experience. In China, students work in teams, which allowed them to create a photographic record of their experiences helping people. Figure 2 shows student Li Ran helping a truck driver. He had heard that it was possible to put music on his phone so he could listen to it on the road. They worked out how to do it on the spot. His amazement and gratitude, the happiness she felt helping him, and the series of photos helped the students put a value on cybernavigating.

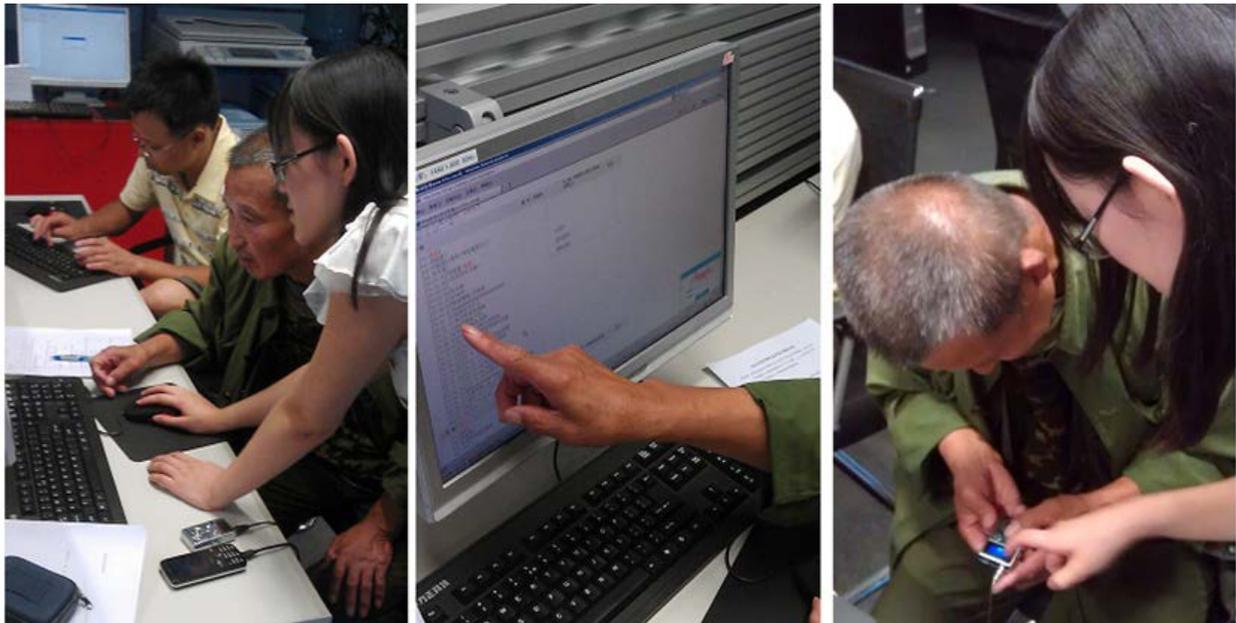


Figure 2. Cybernavigating in a Beijing public library, captured in a student report. A truck driver came in to put his favorite music on his cell phone, and a student cybernavigator showed him how. Photos by Yu Jie, used with permission.

I first met the Chicago cybernavigator Alicia when she spoke at an annual conference that I convene called eChicago. It looks at how local communities are adopting digital technologies. The question is how can communities sustain themselves in the information revolution, fraught as it is with economic dislocation and attendant issues. Since eChicago is a campus-community conference, it brings community workers, local officials, librarians, students, scholars, and ordinary people together to talk about how their local communities are using digital tools of all kinds. What are the blocks, the breakthroughs, the best practices? Alicia and four other cybernavigators were the conference celebrities that year—youthful, positive, solving real problems in their own communities. And my students were in attendance that year and every other, absorbing what was afoot in the communities where they will land as professional librarians.

My research has included focus group discussions with library staff. Each of these was organized for people in like positions, starting with the cybernavigators, trading a small honoraria for their reflections.

As it turned out, many of them had never met each other, certainly not to speak plainly about their work. Scattered across the city, they were partnered with branch library staff, but they were not of the library staff. They are temporary workers on indefinite assignment in a library system with highly structured and hierarchical personnel practices; the library hasn't yet integrated the cybernavigators into the hierarchy. So while they have strong partnerships in the branches, they are also isolated. Talking over the adventures of their day to day work was a pleasure and a comfort, helping them theorize, or rather, make sense of it. Midway through one focus group there was this moment:

Cybernavigator: "This is therapy! You're paying us to have therapy."
[Everyone laughing and talking at once.] (Williams 2012, 56)

Alicia Henry, her co-workers, their patrons, and my students all helped me rethink the digital divide. Where others see it a gap between computer users and non-users, I see human agency and transformation as people overcome this divide by working together. I call it an informatics moment, and it's even changing the library itself:

After witnessing hundreds of informatics moments unfolding before them, the staff and patrons at one branch library began to talk: Will the library be a temple to books? A friendly place to use computers? Will it be both? As their cybernavigator explained, "I think, actually, we get used more than the librarians. [...] Everything seems to be online. So it would only make sense that, you know, with books came the librarian, and with computers came the cybernavigator, you know?" (Williams 2012, 70)

Another story told at eChicago one year illustrates this jolting change. Not too long ago, library staff were trained in book-and-periodical librarianship. Then databases, the internet and public access computers hit the scene. Wikipedia and Google changed the game of searching and sharing information. As librarian Roberta Webb told us, one day she came to work and found people lined up around the block. She called around: it was the same all over the city. The Housing Authority had announced that low income housing applications were online and could be printed at your library. But they hadn't told the library. What a scramble they had that day!

The stories I collected needed to be shared widely in a popular format for students and community workers. Working with PhD student Damien Duffy and art professor John Jennings, we produced a comic book (figure 3). The stories communicated the never ending stream of people seeking help, their frustration and then gratitude. The comic is used as a textbook at Illinois and a training manual in libraries nationwide. (Duffy et al. 2012)



Figure 3. A frame from the comic book *Cybernavigator Stories* by Damian Duffy, John Jennings and Kate Williams. Used with permission.

The success of the comic and our sense of library transformation led us to a logo that we shared freely through Creative Commons (figure 4). It expresses the “computers not books” aspect of libraries, and the “get help here.”



Figure 4. At left, the well-known US public library symbol used in street signs nationwide; at right, a symbol that communicates the new cybernavigating role libraries are playing. Left image in public domain; right image by Duffy and Williams, Creative Commons licensed, freely available for non-commercial use, with attribution.

In addition to cybernavigating, another way my students get additional reports from the field is via our annual Digital Divide Lecture Series, where each year 10-12 local leaders share their digital divide stories. A different student develops a bio for and introduces each speaker, which helps to bridge students into the professional world they will be joining. And they are generally rapt at hearing real-world experiences from someone a little ahead of them on a professional path, in a sector they may

have never come in contact with. There are many surprises. Greg Bruner, Illini Football Video Coordinator, explained that every single person in the football organization spends two-thirds of their time watching game video from the Illini's database of video clips—for recruiting, for training, for planning. His digital divide isn't the high schoolers joining the organization; it's the one remaining coach who insists on VHS tape. Don Owen, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction for Urbana School District 116, explained that in the early days they had to tell an entire school to get off the Internet for an hour so that one class could learn online. Michael Dilley, Urbana's Fire Chief, explained how companies are marketing text based communications for fire scenes, but firefighters are holding on to their walkie-talkies. And Urbana Free Library described how they set policies to limit computer use, but change them as soon as new resources are available; when they were able to try unlimited computer time, everyone's mood at the computers lightened up.

In sum, both students as they get their feet wet and people already working in communities need to talk through their concrete experiences of the technological revolution that's underway. What's possible in an institution like Illinois—land-grant, long-distance-educating, organized around research, teaching, and service, is to orchestrate these discussions and bring them together so that everyone learns faster and moves forward together.

Works Cited

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