

## Tech-mediated Communication

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dividuals; or a search for information about an ice-skating rink that brings you to a picture of your own daughter. Underlying this use of contextualized narrative is the growing prominence of identity and community in tech-mediated communication. If the underlying document process could be seen as involving the construction of a canonical path that will help the user avoid error, the tech-mediated communication process might be conceptualized quite differently, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 articulates what seems to be a common underlying movement in tech-mediated communication. First, we need to begin by asking ourselves, Why do users want control? What will they do with it? The answers will involve an exploration of identity. The users of our exemplary tech-mediated communication are not so much engaged in getting information or completing a task as in using system-offered choices to explore their own identities.

Second, we need to ask ourselves, for what purpose are such identity quests supported by tech-mediated environments? The answer to this second question is clear: to build community. Motives for community building are various, of course. The designer of a non-profit communication material might aim to help those suffering from neurological disorders. A distance-learning environment might be designed to provide a good educational experience to working professionals. A sociology Web site might be designed to offer “a window into the remarkably diverse worlds of indigenous peoples in Canada and throughout the world” ([www.aptn.ca/content/view/21/31](http://www.aptn.ca/content/view/21/31)).

For whatever motive, the technical communicator who aims to create tech-mediated communication, moving users from *control* through *identity* and toward *community*, clearly faces a different task than traditional document design. Traditional metrics of usability—efficiency, accuracy, and satisfaction—no longer provide an adequate yardstick

with which to measure the tech-mediated communication. Instead, we must ask questions like:

- How much control does this tech-mediated communication provide the user? Is it enough? Is it too much?
- In what ways does it afford the user's search for identity? How well does it succeed in allowing this exploration?
- How does this tech-mediated com-

munication build community? What kinds of interactions does it allow? What kinds of networks are built?

These questions, meant to be suggestive, clearly require a new body of knowledge on what makes technical communication usable in a mediated world. Over the next two years, the TMC project will be working with STC to provide some answers. **i**

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# KNACK

(năk)

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