

To Boldly Go Online: Empowering Elders to Connect Socially with Technology

A dedicated community campaign takes the fear out of technology and transforms lives.

“I’m scared I’m going to break it,” said Tricia, the first time she sat in front of a computer. As she moved the mouse around and watched the screen, fear spread across her face. “I don’t think I can do this.”

Like many older adults and people with disabilities, Tricia had no experience using computers and found them intimidating. However, despite many people’s wariness about our increasingly digital world, it is undeniable that technology can be a positive resource that connects us with friends, neighbors, relatives, activities, and learning.

CLC’s mission is to help older adults and people with disabilities build social connections, especially in their community.

At the Community Living Campaign (CLC), our mission is to help older adults and people with disabilities build these connections, especially in their community. We have seen firsthand how technology can play a critical role in creating and multiplying social ties. Through consistent access to computers, trainings, and by integrating technology into other activities, we now know that elders and people with disabili-

ties are more disposed toward using technology. We have seen students become trainers, and nursing home residents become bloggers. We also have seen how technology can reduce isolation and improve safety for those with hearing or vision loss, physical disabilities, and failing health.

Conquering Obstacles to Accessibility

The most fundamental obstacle to older adults and people with disabilities using technology is access. San Francisco has affordable Internet service, plus good resources for purchasing refurbished computers. CLC has been extremely fortunate because the city received a three-year federal grant from the National Telecommunications & Information Administration’s Broadband Technology Opportunity Program. This launched the SF Connected Program (www.sfconnected.org), which placed computers (with log-ins in multiple languages) at senior and community centers and housing sites across San Francisco.

CLC found, however, that the adage, “If you build it, they will come” did not apply. Sadly, elders often write themselves off as not being able to use computers. But our work with



The Aging and Disability Technology Summit brought more than 55 computers and 600 visitors to San Francisco City Hall.

Tyze.com, an online personal networking site that builds support for people with disabilities and their families, helped us understand how supportive communities turn technology into a powerful tool to help individuals age in community. It also led us into a leadership role in the SF Connected Program: CLC was funded to develop a series of trainings—including some focused on social media—to bridge the knowledge gap for people like Tricia.

Tech Trainings that Inspire and Empower

It was essential the trainings be as intimate as possible, ideally conducted in small group settings, with plenty of time for the instructor to give students one-on-one attention. We learned right away that patience and positivity are the most important skills for our instructors and volunteers, plus an ability to personally connect with students, their interests, and their concerns. Not surprisingly, our best instructors are

elders and people with disabilities. There is nothing more inspiring than seeing someone like you doing something you would like to learn. We use a mix of paid and unpaid teachers with a range of technology skills and capacity.

Our students respond best when trainings are highly focused and include a lot of time to practice one skill, rather than being overwhelmed with material and all the information available on the Internet. We have had few issues blending elders, people with disabilities, and caregivers in our classes because everyone has something to learn and share. We find a mix of students ultimately builds confidence all around (and builds more community connections, which is CLC's mission). We also have found that if you succeed in getting someone to that first training, the vast majority of students will keep coming back regularly for tutoring, training, and lab practice time. In the past twelve months, CLC has provided nearly 6,000 participant hours of training in English, Spanish, and Cantonese. This includes a monthly class where attendees bring their laptops, phones, or tablets for free tech support.

Technology can reduce isolation and improve safety for people with hearing or vision loss, physical disabilities, and failing health.

We also learned quickly that the best place to begin training is by asking participants what they would like to accomplish. Whether it's to see photos of grandchildren on Facebook, read news in a native language, video conference with a relative in another country for free, shop for hard-to-get items, or chat in an online breast cancer support group, any and all of these become powerful motivators. Most of our students have no idea what is available on the Internet. For many of us who grew up thinking of learning as a classroom activity or a trip to the library, the realization that you can learn about anything, at any time, and without leaving your

home is a new and powerful concept. Also, being online is a great equalizer. When online, one isn't defined as an elder or a person with a disability, but just a person. This is an empowering feeling for many students.

With some encouragement, Tricia quickly overcame her fear that she might break the computer and became an incredible student. Tricia is like so many people we work with. She wants to stay “in the know” and she wants to make a difference. She saw the potential of technology to help her do both. Soon she was gaining proficiency, using her computer, iPad, and smartphone to stay in touch with her grown sons and family on e-mail and Facebook, keep up with the news, play online games, and continue her role as an activist. Like many of our students, Tricia has said she feels more mentally acute and confident because of these new skills.

Tricia has faced increasing health issues, including breast cancer surgery and continued vision loss, which means she has had a harder time leaving her home and now even her bed. But because already she had gained so many technology skills, she now uses ZoomText to enlarge text, and uses a screen reader to read text aloud to her, both of which have helped her remain “plugged in” despite increasing challenges.

The Transforming Power of Technology

The technology and social media trainings CLC provides are part of a range of programs we run to tackle many issues of how to age well in San Francisco. Other CLC projects include healthy aging workshops; building neighborhood-based support networks that contain older adults and others; and advocacy work on city policy and funding decisions. Yet our technology training is some of the most important work we do in an urban area where steep hills, residences with a lot of stairs, a high cost of living, and an immense language diversity all challenge our efforts to

keep aging adults and those with disabilities from becoming isolated.

At every opportunity, we promote the free technology classes because we know how transformative they are once someone attends. We also integrate connecting people with technology into all of our programs and activities, such as our healthy aging workshops and neighborhood organizing. We have conducted high-profile activities, too, such as organizing an Aging and Disability Technology Summit at City Hall, where we brought computer and Internet access, via more than fifty-five computers, to more than 650 people, in order to show our leaders what access really means (see a video from the summit at <http://vimeo.com/43834475>.)

When federal funding for computer access and trainings was set to end this past fall, we successfully advocated for San Francisco to maintain funding. This advocacy effort, called the Keep Us Connected Campaign, is now pushing for more universal access to free and low-cost Internet service, computers, hand-held devices, technical support, and training.

When elders get the chance to see how technology can connect them with friends, family, and activities—plus receive tailored trainings and regular computer access—they embrace technology wholeheartedly and it becomes a powerful tool for facilitating relationships. We must make sure all older adults have this opportunity. Tricia explains this better than anyone. Based on her experience, she tells others that gaining technology and social media skills is almost as important as going to the doctor because it's that good for your health and happiness as you age. 

Marie Jobling is executive director of the Community Living Campaign (CLC) in San Francisco, California. She can be contacted at marie@sfccommunityliving.org.