Reports: Making Connections X: Sustaining the Earth, the Self, and Women in Catholic Higher Education (Conference Held at Seattle University in June 2011)

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Recommended Citation
We are in the midst of a truly revolutionary period in human history. The development and disbursement of information technology, and in particular the Internet, has created the ability to break down political, cultural, national and geographic boundaries in an entirely new way.

The new opportunities created by information technology also present new challenges, as in the creation of a “digital underclass” who are lacking either access to technology or the education to use it effectively. This is not only a problem in the developing world; it is also a problem in cities like San Francisco. Here at the University of San Francisco, we have developed a service-learning project called Community Connections to help educate students about digital inclusion. Our students work with local technology centers to provide resources, training, and access for poor and underserved populations. Our students and faculty also travel once a year to Tacna, Peru, to set up and maintain computers, teach classes, and train instructors at two Jesuit schools there.

In doing this, our students learn about universality in two ways: first, through the more traditional Jesuit notion of service-learning as a means of better understanding themselves, the world around them, and the academic concepts surrounding the digital divide. Second, and more novel, our students connect directly with people and cultures that might seem very different on the surface. For a USF student to see a Peruvian student’s photos online and realize that they share the same tastes, likes, fears and concerns helps them understand the deep similarities that underlie human experience.

This project also allows for the development of other ways of connecting, from journals detailing the lives of San Francisco’s poor and underserved to Skype connections between teens across continents. Our hope is that we are able to use computers not as a way to isolate ourselves from each other, but to connect, share and empower.

Christopher Brooks is associate dean for sciences and associate professor of computer science at the University of San Francisco. Community Connections is at: http://www.cs.usfca.edu/cc

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