In an increasingly high-tech world, communication is often delivered via computers, cellular telephones, e-mail, personal data assistants, and other electronic devices. Given the convenience and proliferation of these contemporary technologies, it is not surprising that many mothers rely on them to find information, participate in discussion forums, and form social relationships with other mothers. Indeed, a quick online search reveals hundreds of mothering-related blogs, Web sites, Listservs, and other e-based communities. In the modern world, then, many mothers may find themselves tempted by technologies, particularly as electronic modes of communication can foster interaction with large numbers of other mothers all over the world and transmit information easily and economically. Consequently, the idea of sitting down with other mothers for face-to-face dialogue may seem more than a little old-fashioned.

Yet as I demonstrate in this chapter, the seemingly outmoded technology of oral interchange can be an important way for mothers to connect with and deliver support to one another. In particular, I discuss "S.M.A.R.T.: Single Mothers Achieving and Reflecting Together," a support and discussion group for women who are engaged in sole parenting. The group is facilitated by the Women's Resource and Action Center (WRAC), the women's center on the University of Iowa (UI)
campus in Iowa City, Iowa. I draw on data collected during a two-year research project that focused on the experiences of single mothers attending college. I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-two UI single-mother students as well as interviews with WRAC staff members, board members, and participants in S.M.A.R.T. In addition, I engaged in participant observation with the S.M.A.R.T. group during the 2003–2004 academic year and conducted archival research on the history of WRAC at the Iowa Women's Archive.

Based on this research, I argue that what happens within the S.M.A.R.T. group is more than talk. Instead, within the post-welfare reform U.S. political climate as well as the "chilly" climate of higher education, this particular support and discussion group constitutes a unique form of delivery that stands in marked contrast to more high-tech modes of communication. The group facilitates discussion among single mothers and enables them to connect with one another in meaningful ways, share their challenges, and, of equal importance, claim subjectivity in an institutional space in which they are often marginalized. Thus, in the tradition of feminist consciousness-raising, S.M.A.R.T. constitutes a political space in which single mothers use language as a multifaceted tool of engagement, a way to deliver support, ideas, and a sense of community that, as the examples in this chapter demonstrate, are important to their well-being and that of their children.

A TYPICAL S.M.A.R.T. GROUP MEETING

Monday, March 28, 2004. I am fifteen minutes late getting to group. As I push open the front door to the Women's Resource and Action Center, the muffled voices of members of the S.M.A.R.T. group drift down from the second floor. I shake off the raindrops that cling to my hair and begin to climb the steep staircase, my left hand sliding along the oak banister that is original to the 1910 structure as I make my way to the top. Creaks announce each step, and by the time I arrive on the landing, the faces of four toddlers are peering anxiously through the doorway of a small but comfortable space that has been dubbed the "kids' care room." One of them asks, "Did that girl come?" Realizing they are referring to my ten-year-old daughter, I shake my head and reply, "No, she stayed home tonight." Disappointed by my response, they return to their play.

I step to the right and continue down the carpeted hall for several yards before turning left into a spacious but drafty room with faded ochre walls. Navigating through a maze of books, backpacks, coats, and other personal items scattered across the floor, I head for the nearest end of the sofa and sit down directly under the autographed poster of Dolores Huerta. Five women are already in the room. "Kate," the group facilitator, is on the far end of the couch, near the window. "Charlotte" has taken her usual place next to Kate and smiles a friendly "hello." Seated on the floor and near the radiator, "Brenda" is surrounded by the remnants of a Subway dinner. "Lauren" occupies the dark brown chair, the one you literally sink into when you sit in it, and she has tucked her feet beneath her as she struggles to pull her sweater more tightly around her upper body. "Mary" sits closest to the door and is still wearing her coat.

Two apple pies from the supermarket bakery have been placed on a worn end table next to where Kate is sitting. Paper plates, napkins, forks, and a cutting knife have been borrowed from the WRAC kitchen. One of the pies is nearly gone. I am prepared to apologize for my tardiness, but the discussion continues uninterrupted, with group members balancing paper plates on their knees as they converse between bites. The discussion centers on the idea of a group outing. Brenda expresses frustration that she "never gets to have alone time anymore" since her child's father stopped taking their son every other weekend. Lauren brings up the idea of a "girls' night out" and asks, "When are we all going out?" Kate pulls out a flyer advertising the upcoming "family free night" at a local mall and suggests that everyone meet there for free carousel rides, ice skating, and admission to the children's museum. Lauren, somewhat frustrated, says she thinks that would be a great idea but then makes it clear that a girls' night out, without children, is what she really wants. And needs.

Brenda returns to the topic of her son's father, "William." Group members are well aware of her history with him. Over the course of the semester, we have learned about it, little by little, at our Monday night meetings. For nearly five months, the couple had been involved in a bitter custody battle over their son. The whole situation had taken her by surprise. Although Brenda said William had initially been real excited about the pregnancy, he abandoned her midway through her second trimester. He reappeared right before Brandon was born and, according to Brenda, "stuck around for a little over a week" before disappearing again. The next time Brenda heard from William was through his lawyer. Brandon was a little over two-and-a-half years old at the time, and William was suing for full custody of the boy. Ultimately, William was denied custody but awarded visitation, a right he exercised for just over two months before vanishing again. Brenda was left with over $20,000 in legal bills. Brandon was left without a father.
After Brenda finishes sharing with the group, Kate silently passes her the box of Kleenex. She takes one and wipes her nose. After a few moments of silence, there is some discussion of the family court system, including child support recovery and how difficult it can be to track down a "deadbeat dad." Mostly, however, group members try to comfort Brenda and help her formulate some possible ways of dealing with the situation. As the discussion wanes, Lauren, who has been mostly silent, returns to the idea of a girls' night out and asks, "So when are we all going to go out?" Mary pulls out her planner, and since nobody can afford child care, the group settles on a child-inclusive potluck for the following weekend at Kate's house.

HISTORY OF THE SINGLE MOMS' GROUP AT WRAC

Currently located in a two-story, well-worn Victorian house that appears quaint and old-fashioned amidst the brick and concrete university buildings that surround it, the Women's Center was founded in March 1971 by members of the Women's Liberation Front (WLF), a group of students and community members alike who had ties to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and other student and radical political movements. Founders believed the center would serve as a vehicle for challenging sexism, both within and beyond the walls of the academy. Operated via a collective decision-making process, the fledgling center offered educational programming, numerous support and discussion groups, a feminist library, office space for the local chapter of the National Organization of Women (NOW), the Rape Victim Advocacy Program, and other women-centered organizations in the community, and it sponsored a fast-pitch softball team and other forms of women-centered amusement and recreation.

It was not until nearly five years later that a support and discussion group for single mothers began with a notice in the January 1976 issue of the WRAC Newsletter:

A support group for unmarried mothers is being organized. The first meeting will be held January 19 at 7 p.m. This group is for women who have never been married, who have made the decision to raise a child alone; who sometimes doubt their capabilities as mothers. Hopefully, we, as single mothers, can provide one another with information and support. It is important for us to retain our rights as single women while being good mothers. It is possible! We need reassurance. We can give this support to each other. If there is a need for this group, the only way to fulfill it is through participation. Child care will be provided. If you need transportation, or any further information, call the WRAC at 353-6265. Thank you. (WRAC Newsletter 1976b)

This description, though brief, reveals much about WRAC's understanding of and attitude toward single motherhood. First and foremost, the announcement acknowledges the power of the cultural definition of the "good mother" and indicates that while single mothers may, at times, "doubt their capabilities," they most certainly can be "good mothers." In addition, it makes clear that the center is willing to support single mothers by dedicating resources to the group, including child care, transportation, and meeting space, something particularly important given the "competition for space" among WRAC groups at the time (Silander 2002). The announcement also hints at the political nature of single motherhood, particularly the need for single mothers to retain their rights. Finally, it suggests that single mothers could not only find support and reassurance by participating in the group but also provide the same to other women who have "made the decision to raise a child alone." Thus the notice served as a call to action of sorts, positing single motherhood as an important political identity. Within the first month, so many women joined the group that WRAC listed the "Unmarried Mothers" as one of its regular, "ongoing" groups (WRAC Newsletter 1976c). By March, only two months after the original announcement appeared, the group had secured a permanent slot in the WRAC schedule (WRAC Newsletter 1976d).

It is unclear where the idea for the single mothers' group originated. Publicity and discussion relating to a conference, "The Single Parent Family," held February 11-14, 1976, in the UI student union, may have generated interest among WRAC staff and clients and thus led to the formation of the group (WRAC Newsletter 1976a). It seems more likely, however, that the group grew directly out of the needs and interests of early WRAC volunteers.

Single mothers had been prominent among those who founded the center, including a single, lesbian mother who rented the Quonset hut that served as the original UI Women's Center (Silander 2002). Members of the WLF helped turn the living room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and bathroom of the structure into "one large telephone-reception-sitting-party room, one kitchen, one playroom, one crashing room, a bathroom, and some closet space" (Aint I a Woman 1971). In addition, single mothers involved in the WLF drew attention to the specific issues
they faced as sole, custodial mothers, particularly in relation to day care and the demands of being a "struggling student with a young child" (Sand 2002). In fact, the issue of child care was so central to members' analysis of women's economic, social, and political oppression that it was listed first on their list of demands intended to bring about revolutionary change:

WE DEMAND THAT A SYSTEM OF DAY CARE CENTERS BE ESTABLISHED. These centers should be open 24 hours a day. They must be staffed equally by men and women. They must meet the needs of children and must be controlled by the parents and children who use them. (Ain't I a Woman? 1970; The Daily Iowan 1970)

In addition, their ninth demand offered a clear position on marriage:

WE DEMAND AN END TO THE MARRIAGE CONTRACT which presupposes the submission of the female to the male. Marriage and the nuclear family is the acceptable living situation today. Because of this the single woman is severely limited and children are treated as property of their parents. All people (including the young) must be treated as individuals with individual social and economic rights. (Ain't I a Woman? 1970; The Daily Iowan 1970)

Together, the demands illustrate a clear support for women who are mothers, including those who chose not to be "severely limited" by the ideal of the nuclear family.

This is not to suggest that WRAC's early years were free from conflict where motherhood and child care were concerned. On the contrary, there were intense debates surrounding these issues. For example, there was a tendency to automatically assign mothers to the child care cell as others involved with the center "pressured [them] to join groups based on their relationship to children and motherhood" (Silander 2002). In addition, women who did not have children resented the fact that, in keeping with the center's principles of collective support and action, they were expected to donate time and money to child care efforts (Silander 2002).

Despite these tensions, WRAC has continued to provide child care and to support single mothers through the single mothers' support and discussion group. The group has been offered almost continuously since it began in 1976. While there was a one-and-a-half year gap from the spring of 1978 until the group resumed in the fall of 1979, the single mothers' group ran consecutively for twenty years, from the fall of 1979 through the fall of 1999. Then, after a one-semester hiatus, the group started up again in the spring of 2000 and has been offered continually since that time. In fact, since 1976, WRAC has offered the group not only during the academic year but also during eighteen summer sessions. After my research on S.M.A.R.T ended in 2004, the group maintained a presence in the community, at times meeting as part of WRAC's formal lineup of support and discussion groups and other times adopting a more loosely structured approach and organizing meetings and other activities outside of WRAC's space. The presence and longevity of the single mothers' group indicate not only high demand for it over the years but also WRAC's ongoing commitment to the group, providing a group facilitator, space, and other resources essential to the groups' continuation.

The WRAC staff and board members I interviewed were quite knowledgeable about the single mothers' group, and several discussed the group's name changes that have occurred in the past decade. Dubbed "Mothers without Partners" during the mid-1990s, it was renamed "Single Hip Mamas" shortly after the turn of the century, then "S.M.A.R.T.: Single Mothers Achieving and Reflecting Together" during the 2003–2004 academic year. Staff and board members also addressed the philosophical reasons behind those changes and provided a list of the various single mothers who facilitated the group over the years. Regardless of name changes and group facilitators, however, the goals of the group have remained fairly consistent. As staff member "Amelia Breaux" explains, these include "helping single moms build relationship[s] and have peers and peer support and be able to draw strength from that by sharing all the stuff that is part of your life...being able to have that sense of not being the only one, that other people have lived through this, and that together we have more wisdom than we have separately."

**SUPPORT FOR THE SINGLE MOTHERS' GROUP**

I conducted research as a participant observer in the S.M.A.R.T. group during the 2003–2004 academic year, attending weekly meetings from August 2003 through May 2004. The group met on Monday evenings from 6–7:30 p.m. in WRAC's large group room. A total of eight single mothers participated. Not all participants however, were present at every session. In fact, a typical meeting was likely to include only three
or four participants. There were two occasions when the group facilitator, Kate, was the only one to show up besides myself. Four participants, Kate, Lauren, Charlotte, and Mary, comprised the core of the group and attended almost every meeting, missing only on rare occasions. Brenda’s attendance was sporadic. She did not participate during the fall semester. During spring, she would come for two or three sessions and then be absent for a week or two before returning. Three women, Stacy, Kelsey, and Wendy, each attended a single meeting during the research period.

Given that the number of participants is small and attendance sporadic, it would not be surprising if WRAC discontinued the group. Such a decision might even make sense from a resource management perspective. For example, the meeting space might be used for other groups or events that would serve a greater number of clients. In addition, wages paid to child care workers who oversee the kids’ care room during S.M.A.R.T. meetings might be allocated to other expenses, especially given the shoestring budget of the center.

It seems unlikely, however, that these things will happen, particularly given the support for the group expressed among WRAC board members and staff. “Karla Anderson,” a WRAC Advisory Board member for over five years, spoke of the pride she felt in being part of an organization that provided that type of support. She said it “makes me really proud to be affiliated with the center, to know that we provide that service . . . I think the single moms group serves an incredible need and one that is obviously not being served elsewhere in our community.” Staff member Jennifer Trainor also indicated strong support for the group and articulated an understanding of the political nature of single motherhood. When I asked Jennifer if she thought it was important for the group to continue, she responded by pointing to the changes wrought by the welfare reform of the mid-1990s and particularly her belief that the “need is even greater . . . as other services and [programs] are being cut and changed. Things like the Family Investment Program . . . social services and daycare funds.” Another staff member, Amelia, believes the group helps single mothers connect with one another, helps them “build relationships and have peers and peer support.” In addition, she situates the challenges U1 single-mother students face within broader political frameworks pertaining to single motherhood:

The whole of welfare reform is just forcing single mothers away from their children and into the workforce, into crappy jobs that don’t pay enough to live on, with no child care, no transportation, no health care. . . . [At the university] there’s inadequate child care, it’s too expensive, it’s substandard in some cases. . . . many faculty have a negative attitude about students who are being both parents and students, whether it’s single parents or parents who are partnered.

In the post-welfare reform era, the challenges facing single mothers are, as Amelia’s statement indicates, substantial. Scholars and critics alike have demonstrated that passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) essentially dismantled the social safety net that had formerly provided much-needed support to needy families, the majority of whom were single mothers and their children (Abramovitz 1996; Kingfisher 1996; Mink 1998, 1999; Sidel 1998; Albeda and Withorn 2002). At the federal level, PRWORA reduced available cash grants, placed strict time limits on receipt of aid, and altered both the Food Stamps program and child care funding. It also gave individual states the right to impose stricter sanctions as they deemed appropriate. Finally, PRWORA dramatically reduced opportunities for participation in postsecondary education and training programs. In doing so, it blocked an important avenue out of poverty for poor women (Adair 2001; Center for Women Policy Studies 2002; Zhan and Pandey 2004), leaving many quite literally “shut out” of institutions of higher education (Polakow et al. 2004). In fact, from 1996 to 1998, college enrollment among welfare recipients declined 20 percent nationally (Cox and Spriggs 2002). At some institutions, decreases have totaled 50 percent and higher among students receiving public assistance (Applied Research Center 2001; Kates 1998; Kahn and Polakow 2000; Marx 2002).

Even with the barriers posed by welfare reform, some single mothers do make the decision to pursue postsecondary education. Yet the challenges they face are significant. In addition to struggling financially, they encounter sometimes insurmountable challenges in relation to child care and frequently find it difficult to balance the diverse and often competing demands they face as single mothers, college students, and, in many cases, employees. While many single mothers must grapple with issues pertaining to finances, child care, and time constraints, those attending college also face the unique challenge of a “chilly” climate that marginalizes them in both subtle and obvious ways (Duquaine-Watson 2007).

An understanding of these issues has prompted WRAC staff to take specific action to help ensure continuation of the S.M.A.R.T. group. During the center’s early years and into the 1990s, child care was often
a challenge. The center relied on volunteers for this task, typically students who would or would not show up, depending on illness, homework, work schedules, and other commitments. Thus it was not unusual for a volunteer to cancel or simply not to show up. Furthermore, although volunteers frequently claimed they liked being around children, few had experience in early childhood education or training in CPR and first aid. To address this situation, child care became a regular item on the agenda at weekly WRAC staff meetings throughout the 2001–2002 academic year. Staff members drafted a job description that included, according to Amelia, “a decent amount of experience doing child care, they have to be trained in First Aid and CPR, and we especially like it if their certification in those is current but we will pay for our child care workers to attend a course if their certification has lapsed.” Staff also determined a formula for caregiver-to-child ratio and made it a priority to clean, paint, and reorganize the kids’ care room and clean out the toy closet, discarding old or broken toys or those that presented a choking hazard. They also placed toys into storage tubs based on age-appropriateness. The center then advertised for two child care positions, taking applications before interviewing prospects and eventually hiring two work-study students who are scheduled for every Monday evening during S.M.A.R.T. meetings.

These changes in child care have been quite successful. Child care was available for every meeting of S.M.A.R.T. during the course of this research. And the children who participated in kids’ care have given it positive reviews. Brenda says that her son “loves the kids’ care room and the other kids and the staff.” One Monday evening when she considered staying home to catch up on her sleep rather than attend S.M.A.R.T., her son begged, “Please, oh please can we go? I really want to play with the mommies’ kids!” My ten-year-old daughter also gave me feedback on the child care provided at WRAC after attending kids’ care while I conducted participant observation in the S.M.A.R.T. group. She gave the workers, toys, and other kids an enthusiastic “two thumbs up! Way up!”

WRAC staff has also made a concerted effort to ensure that there are volunteers on hand to facilitate the group. Despite beginning the 2003–2004 academic year without a facilitator for the group, WRAC’s group services coordinator says she “got the word out that we really needed someone” by calling and e-mailing people across the UI campus. Kate, a former participant in the group, applied for the position and completed the group facilitator training, thus enabling the center to offer the group during both the fall and spring semesters.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE: CONNECTION, SUPPORT, STRUGGLE, AND RESISTANCE

As important as these forms of support from WRAC staff are, they are not the only reasons for the continuing presence of the single mothers’ group among the center’s annual group offerings. Fundamental to the group’s success is the participation of single mothers and the support they provide to one another. I requested one-on-one interviews with all of the women who participated in the single mothers group during the 2003–2004 academic year. Four of them, Kate, Brenda, Lauren, and Mary, agreed to be interviewed for this project.

The women who participate in S.M.A.R.T. are not all that different from the other single mother students at UI. They have arrived at single motherhood in various ways, including through divorce, unintended out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and intended out-of-wedlock pregnancy. They also face many of the same challenges as other single mother students, including time constraints, child care, economics, and a “chilly” institutional climate.

However, unlike their peers, they have made the decision to participate in S.M.A.R.T. In doing so, particularly through sharing stories, experiences, and feelings with other group members, these women rely on language as a means of both seeking support from and offering support to one another. Thus they have been able to effectively address two of the primary needs of single mother students at UI—both those who participated in S.M.A.R.T. during the course of the research and those who did not—identified as important to their success as parents and students: the need for meaningful social interaction with their peers and the need for information about resources that exist both at UI and in the broader community.

Language, though, is about more than connection. In addition, and as bell hooks (1989) has argued, language can be a source of empowerment, enabling marginalized groups to claim space and subjectivity. For single mothers, language is also, as Kingfisher (1996) contends, a political act, an “everyday” form of engagement through which they actively participate in producing, reproducing, and contesting identity, ideology, institutional arrangements, and policy. . . . Language is the primary means by which we share our lives with others. It provides the means to typify and categorize experiences in ways that have meaning for ourselves subjectively and for others objectively in
the same category of experience. . . . The use of language in interaction is a key location for the ongoing interpretation and construction of the social world, and is a significant and fundamental way we create meaning. . . . Meaning, then, is not only imposed on individuals but also bestowed by them. (4)

Through participation in S.M.A.R.T., then, single mother students use language in a variety of ways. It allows them not only to connect with one another but also to make meaning of their experiences and actively engage with, interpret, and analyze cultural and institutional ideologies. Of equal importance, participation in the group fosters dialogue that enables these women to formulate and communicate a sense of identity and self that centers on belonging, inclusion, and understanding, something that stands in marked contrast to the marginalization and stigmatization many of them experience within the broader university. For Brenda, this is the primary reason she began participating in the group shortly after her son was born, and it has continued to bring her back year after year. As she described it, "The single moms' group is the only place I've ever been where I've been around women [on this campus] who get it. They just get it. They know what I'm talking about, what I'm going through." For Kate, participation in the group was spurred by frustration concerning what she perceives as a lack of attention to the issues facing single mother students on the UI campus. She believes that "the university [does not] even think about single mother students . . . many instructors don't even consider that we are here on this campus." Mary, like Brenda, regarded participation in S.M.A.R.T. as a way to connect with other people on campus who could understand both the challenges and rewards of being a single mother student, who would "know something about how it can be hard and how it can be great to be a single mother because they had that experience as well." For Lauren, it was important that the group was peer-facilitated, as she had "had enough of people who don't know what it's like [to be a single mother] trying to tell me how to raise my kids and what I need to do." Building connections with other single mother students was also one of the principal reasons she joined the group. Yet she desired those connections not only for herself but also for her children. As she explained, "I want them to be connected to more people than just me, to have more in life than just me and my paycheck to count on."

Through participation in the group and the resulting relationships and sense of community, the women support one another in numerous ways. They offer suggestions about resources in the community as well as "insider information" about their experiences as individuals who have relied on those resources. These include federal programs for day care and housing, state-sponsored programs, and local initiatives through churches, secular groups, and the university. Yet the way in which the women support one another extends beyond simply sharing information about resources. The women also inform one another about exactly who to contact at a particular agency or organization because, according to group members, locating resources is only half the battle. Actually securing things they need or qualify for can be a different story altogether and may depend, at least in part, on who they talk to at an office.

This was certainly the case for Lauren. She had moved to Iowa City from Utah with her two young daughters in late December 2003, eager to begin graduate school at UI. She was supposed to start the previous August, but due to an illness that left her hospitalized for several weeks, she had to wait until January to begin classes. The postponement left her in a difficult situation. She had filed for Section 8 housing assistance in Iowa City more than six months earlier and had been approved for a move-in date of August 1. However, when her illness forced her to wait until January, she was considered to have "declined" her housing assistance and, consequently, she was placed at the bottom of a very long waiting list. Lauren did not receive a letter informing her of the changes in her Section 8 status until days before moving to Iowa City. Thus she arrived in the city and had to put down $1,300 to cover security deposit and rent. It drained her finances, including her credit cards, and she was left without money for phone, food, or bus fare. She admitted that she and the kids "hadn't eaten much" the past few days.

As Lauren described her situation to the other members of S.M.A.R.T., they were silent, nodding their heads every now and again. While none of them had been in her exact situation, several had personal experience dealing with agencies, and all of them, to varying degrees, spoke of struggling to meet the basic needs of themselves and their children. When Lauren finished, the silence of S.M.A.R.T. group members ended almost immediately as they began to create not only a list of places Lauren could go for assistance but also exactly who she should talk to at each place. Kate told her that she needed to appeal the Section 8 decision, and that if she told them about her illness, it "should be fairly easy to get it back. But make sure you go on Monday. That's when Maggie works, she takes the walk-ins then, and she's really great. She's understanding and is willing to work with you." Someone took out a piece of paper and a pen and began to write down various names, phone numbers, and addresses for Lauren. By the time the
group finished, the list had grown to nearly twenty service sites, including the county crisis center, a church that is known in the community for providing emergency assistance, the food bank, the free lunch program, WIC, the Free Medical Clinic, the Salvation Army, the director of the UI Family Services Office, and others. I later learned that after the meeting, Mary had given Lauren and her children a ride home so they would not have to walk in the January cold. In addition, and claiming that she “had been dying for some French fries anyway,” Mary had taken Lauren and the kids to McDonald’s and bought them all dinner.

The following week, Lauren reported that she was still working to get her housing assistance back but had talked with Maggie at the office and had a “wonderful experience with her. She was laid back and not at all like some social service workers.” Through the county crisis center, she had gotten bus passes for herself and her daughter as well as two bags of groceries. Although it was not “quite enough to feed us for the week,” Lauren was certainly appreciative of the fact that “at least we can eat now and won’t have to go to bed hungry every night.” In addition, one of the local churches provided Lauren’s family with hats, mittens, and coats, something they desperately needed, as they had “underestimated how cold it would be in Iowa.” She had also visited several free meal sites throughout the community, indicating that “if someone wanted to, they could probably eat free lunch and dinner every day of the week in Iowa City.” Within a few weeks, she had gotten her Section 8 reinstated as well. While the recommendations provided by other members of S.M.A.R.T. did not solve the various challenges facing Lauren, they had been crucial in helping her connect with resources and programs that have made a real difference in helping her secure food, affordable shelter, and warm clothing for her family. Thus, and as this example demonstrates, group participants rely on language to make knowledge claims—particularly as knowledge is gained through experience—and to deliver that knowledge in ways that can have a positive impact on the lives of other group members and their children.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed a low-tech, rather unique means of delivering information about mothering: a support and discussion group for single mothers. Like all modes of delivery, the S.M.A.R.T. group has some limitations. Perhaps the most obvious is the group’s low participation rate. The total number of participants over the 2003–2004 academic year was rather small, only eight women, and of that total number, only four attended the group on a regular basis—Kate, Charlotte, Mary, and Lauren. Others, like Brenda, attended sporadically, or, like Stacy, Kelsey, and Wendy, they attended only a single meeting. Because of these variations in attendance patterns, it was difficult for the facilitator to make plans for any given session, as she never knew who was going to show up. As a result, the group lacked a formal structure or agenda, and it was difficult to know who was going to be there from one week to the next. Furthermore, it is difficult to measure the impact of the single mothers’ support and discussion group, particularly in ways that yield any quantitative data. And such data, of course, may be significant in helping others understand the importance of the group and vital in helping WRAC secure funding from both public and private sources, which is crucial to the future of the women’s center overall and to the S.M.A.R.T. group in particular.

While it is important to consider these limitations, it is equally important to listen to the single mother students who participate in S.M.A.R.T. and attempt to understand the significance that the group holds for them. Clearly, those who were interviewed think the group is valuable. It provides an opportunity to make connections with others who share similar experiences and to support one another by sharing resources, including information, food, and friendship. Most indicated that they would like more single mothers to attend because, as Brenda explained, “there are so many on this campus and in Iowa City, and it would be great to just share more information or different perspectives on parenting or whatever.” However, Mary pointed out that a smaller group “allows everyone to hear what one another are saying and everyone to have an opportunity to talk.” In addition, while the “open membership” status of the group often means that attendance changes from one session to the next, group members liked this flexibility and lack of structure. For Kate, this was an especially important aspect of the group. For her, it is important to “have a place . . . where it’s not totally structured, where it’s okay to walk in half an hour late if you have to or leave early if you have to. Or to miss a group meeting if you’re too tired and don’t feel like doing another thing that day because you’ve already gone to all of your classes and taken care of the kid and all of that.” Thus what some might critique as a lack of structure is, in fact, what participants consider one of the strengths of the group and something that enables their ongoing involvement in S.M.A.R.T.

There is no doubt that digital communications have become increasingly common and even preferred for many individuals and groups. The S.M.A.R.T. model represents, in many ways, a move against
this trend in that it seeks to remove technological barriers between participants rather than add to them. And yet it is crucial to remember that talk is not a mere default setting to which all humans revert. Face-to-face interaction and exchange is the original and most primary art of inter-relation. But it takes, in all senses of the word, practice. This recognition of the importance of practice—that is, a particular type of delivery that leads to products such as insight, community, and solidarity—throws a light on what is really happening in a S.M.A.R.T session. Those of us who seek to support mothers might do well to resist the lure of the high-tech world and remember that nothing can replace what happens when individuals sit down together in a physical space to share their thoughts, laughter, tears, and experiences as they forge meaningful, supportive connections with other mothers. And while mothers from all walks of life may benefit from these types of connections, they may be especially important for single mothers and other groups who find themselves economically, politically, or otherwise marginalized.

NOTES

1. Throughout this chapter, I use pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality.
2. The demands were printed simultaneously in the UI student newspaper, The Daily Iowan, as well as the feminist underground magazine, Ain't I A Woman?
3. Information on the WRAC support and discussion group for single mothers was gathered from monthly WRAC Newsletters, January 1976–July 2004.

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