

Pattern Language for Online Communities

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Introduction

There are times in your life where you entertain a passion and you want to find other people who share the same passion, are troubled by the same concerns, active in the same domain. They will understand your passion and will be glad to get into profound discussions on the finer points and angles of your shared issue of interest.

Among one's direct circle of acquaintances one can find a few friends who share this interest, of course there is a great joy in meeting many more, but those are a little harder to find or meet – sometimes there are conventions or clubs or gatherings dedicated to the topic of interest, (sometimes there are none), but even they – joyous as they are – are ever limited by mundane concerns such as time and distances...

The electronic communication that developed immensely during the last decades can provide a wonderful solution to all these by platforms of synchronous and a-synchronous communication where enthusiasts from different locations, some far away or even on different time zones, discuss the topic of their interest, create co-operation or simply in other words: create online communities..

By overcoming these problems of time and location, online communities allow for wonderful synergy between people who would not have been able to hold discussion and be enriched by each other with the same comfort and ease.

Dating back to the Usenet days, the life cycle of mailing lists[19] was described as the following:

“Every list seems to go through the same cycle:

1. **Initial enthusiasm** (*people introduce themselves, and gush alot about how wonderful it is to find kindred souls*).
2. **Evangelism** (*people moan about how few folks are posting to the list, and brainstorm recruitment strategies*).
3. **Growth** (*more and more people join, more and more lengthy threads develop, occasional off-topic threads pop up*).
4. **Community** (*lots of threads, some more relevant than others; lots of information and advice is exchanged; experts help other experts as well as less experienced colleagues; friendships develop; people tease each other; newcomers are welcomed with generosity and patience; everyone -- newbie and expert alike -- feels comfortable asking questions, suggesting answers, and sharing opinions*).
5. **Discomfort with diversity** (*the number of messages increases dramatically; not every thread is fascinating to every reader; people start complaining about the signal-to-noise ratio; person 1 threatens*

*to quit if *other* people don't limit discussion to person 1's pet topic; person 2 agrees with person 1; person 3 tells 1 & 2 to lighten up; more bandwidth is wasted complaining about off-topic threads than is used for the threads themselves; everyone gets annoyed).*

*6a. **Smug complacency and stagnation** (the purists flame everyone who asks an 'old' question or responds with humor to a serious post; newbies are rebuffed; traffic drops to a doze-producing level of a few minor issues; all interesting discussions happen by private email and are limited to a few participants; the purists spend lots of time self-righteously congratulating each other on keeping off-topic threads off the list).*

OR

*6b. **Maturity** (a few people quit in a huff; the rest of the participants stay near stage 4, with stage 5 popping up briefly every few weeks; many people wear out their second or third 'delete' key, but the list lives contentedly ever after)."*

The following pattern language describes the “human” part of this cooperation, focusing on issues and points requiring attention unique to the use people make of electronic platforms.

Dating way back to the first Electronic Bulletin Board Systems – online communities are a great solution to finding people who share your passion and join forces with them towards creating a virtual space where people come together for knowledge, discussions, value and fun.

This pattern language is about making this magic work...

Intended Audience and Assumptions

This pattern language is intended for founders, moderators and facilitators of online shared interest communities.

This pattern language assumes the reader is familiar with basic technology required for interaction in online media (such as use of existing forum infrastructure). No additional technical background is assumed.

Readers interested in technical aspects of online collaboration platforms can find a goldmine of knowledge in [1].

In the recent years a few books have been published describing related pattern languages dealing with online interactions.

Fearless Change[9] by Rising and Manns is about introducing change in organizations for people who act as change agents.

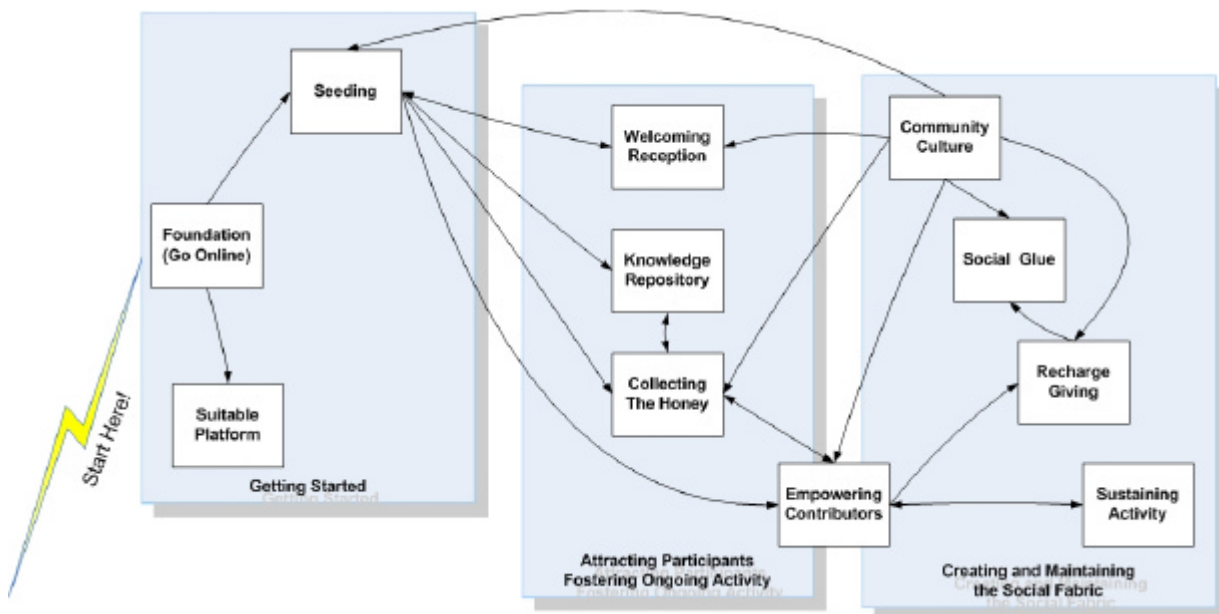
Patterns for Computer-Mediated Interactions by Schuemmer and Lukosch[1] is about online collaboration and is intended for developers of groupware, groupware users and researchers in the field of computer supported collaborative work.

Both bodies of work are goal oriented – in Fearless Change[9] the goal is sustainable change in the organization, in Patterns for Computer-Mediated Interactions[1] the goal is construction by groupware applications, such as collaborative development of software.

Both bodies of work have an underlying assumption that their audience is there by an implicit or explicit commitment

This pattern language focuses on the construction and maintenance of the social fabric of online communities. The authors' underlying supposition is that founders, moderators and facilitators need to invest their efforts to form their community and that collaborators have alternate venues to their favorite topic.

Pattern Language Overview



The Pattern Language for Online Communities consists of the following patterns, aimed at resolving the problems listed next to each pattern:

Foundation (Go Online) – How can you find people who share your enthusiasm for your favorite topic, suffer the same pains or enjoy the same passion? (Page 5)

Seeding - You want to create the feel of "real substance" to it, so people who will happen to visit your community will not dismiss it as a wannabe effort or a waste of time. (Page 7)

Welcoming Reception – When people first arrive to your online community, they are unsure they are welcome and if they have a voice in this new place. (Page 9)

Empowering Contributors - If you become the single contributor in the community you are most likely to either dry up or create a feeling of an autocracy in the community. (Page 11)

Knowledge Repository - while recurring questions present a real need, the less than polite replies from community veterans can scare away possible new members or create bad reputation for the community. (Page 13)

Collecting The Honey - The unique input of knowledge, insights, integration of information, the results of the synergy between participants, is accessible to all for some time and then moved on to the archives (in the better case) or deleted to save space for new data (in the worse case), and no longer easily retrievable for those who may seek it. (Page 16)

Sustaining Activity - How do you keep the community from falling asleep – which usually leads to abandoning the site? (Page 19)

Community Culture - Sometimes communities deteriorate into competitions among community members on issues such as respect (expertise, knowledge, authority, titles) or resources (customers, knowledge, self-advertising). (Page 18)

Social Glue - Relative anonymity sometimes causes people to feel uncomfortable, encourages flame wars and prejudices and assumptions about other faceless participants. (Page 21)

Recharge Giving - Studies show that normally there is a larger percentage of people asking questions than people answering them, this creates a situation of single sided energy sapping, and could exhaust the active members of the community. (Page 22)

Suitable Platform – The choice of platform affects some aspects of community spirit. (Page 23)

Name

Foundation (Go Online)

Context

Getting started.

Problem

You are interested in a certain topic; you even have friends who share this interest. It could be so much more fun to meet many more people like us, talk with them, hold discussions or argue over the finer points of our shared domain of interest. **Problem is, such enthusiasts are scattered all over the country - or even live abroad, and meeting them once a year is just not enough.**

Forces

- There are many enthusiasts in the domain of interest but they live far away
- Geographical or other dispersion may make it difficult to allow people to meet and interact.
- People have social need of being together with other people who share their interests
- Critical mass makes it easier for people to join and interact
- Some people find face to face interactions with other people to be more difficult than online interaction.

Solution

Locate a **Suitable Platform*** for hosting your community online and Start the community online presence and give it backbone by **Seeding**.

Resulting Context

Fellow enthusiasts will find a flag, motto and vision they can share and use to collaborate and interact.

This initial presence provides support for more people to join and create a critical mass of participants.

While some people might not yet have the courage to actively interact, they may still find your site useful and lurk[2] around until they will pick up courage or a need for interaction arises.

However, taking this approach ad-absurdum may cause splintering of a community until you reach a community of one – the joke post " How Many Mail List Subscribers

Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb? "[3] is highly illustrative of this fragmentation process. Try first finding out if your passion might be better served by joining an existing online presence.

* Suitable Platform – The platform needs to fit your intended audience in look & feel, required technical know-how in order to use and the level of interaction. It should also meet your capabilities – in technical skills, budget and effort required to bring it online and maintain it. [TDB - To be further developed as a pattern or Appendix].

Known Uses

1. SourceForge.net[4] Web site provides people who believe in open source software to pool together their resources by creating a site that supports distributed development of open source software, throughout the entire lifecycle of software development. The platform provides tools for activities such as deciding on features, configuration management, bug reporting and resolution and distribution of software to users.
2. Ward's Wiki-Wiki-Web[5] was created by Ward Cunningham with primary focus on "PeopleProjectsAndPatterns in SoftwareDevelopment". The platform provides people with a way to present ideas and discuss topics without the need to be in the same location at the same time, as well as an easy way to link topics together into hyper-text.
3. Usenet Newsgroups[6] was created to provide Usenet users with a platform that allows people to propose opening a newsgroup on any topic they are interested in, subject to a vote procedure. A good example of the activity of a newsgroup can be found in comp.realtime[7]
4. The Pedagogical Patterns Web site[8] provides educators who are interested in authoring patterns or in applying them in their organization to "meet" online, discuss the patterns, review and learn about the body of work that was already reviewed.

Related Patterns

The **e-Forum**[9] pattern is an application of this pattern in the context of introducing a new idea (such as patterns) into organizations.

Name

Seeding

Context

Getting started.

Problem

When starting a new online community, **you want to create the feel of "real substance" to it, so people who will happen to visit will not dismiss it as a wannabe effort or a waste of time**, but will want to stay and even contribute

Forces

- People tend to judge a new online project according to criteria such as structure, seriousness, and organization of the site.
- Uncertainty regarding the nature of the site – “does it fit me and my needs”
- People prefer to wait before they contribute to a shaky project.
- People are more willing to cooperate and put effort into a project that feels creditable.
- People create an opinion on most issues within a few minutes of first impressions.
- You want to catch people’s attention and interest.

Solution

Create an initial structure and form to your online community by declaring purpose and/or vision, establishing ground rules, placing initial content of value to people who share your interests and teasers such as questions, polls, information of value about the shared domain of interest. All those will hopefully catch visitors’ attention and make them want to respond and join in.

Create “places” and tools to be used in the future of the community, they will serve both as a way to convey expectations and real help in using **Collecting The Honey** pattern.

Place the purpose and/or vision, and ground rules in easily accessible locations (especially from the **Welcoming Reception**), so that throughout the community life people can find and use them and you will be able to refer members, new participants and visitors to them.

Resulting Context

By presenting a creditable, inviting, structured online space combined with valuable interesting content you shorten the time people take about deciding to join in and respond, share, or participate in the activity.

However don't overdo your personal contributions as you risk creating an autocratic atmosphere or nurturing a "feed me Seymour" mentality perpetuating the need for your contribution at the cost of other people’s interaction and input.

Continue to update the contents (rules, maybe even the purpose and/or vision) as needed according to the nature of activity and participants – chances are that participants will present (intentionally or by accident) angles you have not anticipated at the beginning.

Known Uses

1. Ward's Wiki[5] WikiArchive provides a way to look back in time and explore the way the site was on August 1996. The WelcomeVisitors page for that time[10] has started out with the following links to additional pages:
“ PortlandPatternRepository, MoreAboutMechanics, PeopleProjectsAndPatterns, StartingPoints, RecentVisitors, RecentChanges.
The page ends with the following sentences as a teaser and an illustration of the nature of this site:
These pages are about PeopleProjectsAndPatterns. Please read this before you go on. Then have a look at various StartingPoints. Before you leave, try your hand at editing by adding your name to our list of RecentVisitors. For those of you infatuated with novelties, try RecentChanges.
Please do not edit this page. “
2. Pedagogical Patterns[8] Web site has a section titled Example Patterns[11] :
“ This section was initially seeded by contributions from the founding members of the groups .
This page contains some example patterns created as part of the project. We encourage everybody to try them out and give us feedback. “
3. In one of the largest online forums portals in Israel – Tapuz[12] – when a new forum is opened there are several tools provided automatically (such as Links section, Articles section, Polls tool, etc.) and there are a few more optional tools ready for activation by the forum manager according to the nature and needs of the community (such as Terms Dictionary, Photo albums, Event Calendar etc.)

Related Patterns

Collecting The Honey provides examples of useful information that can be used as seeds.

Name

Welcoming Reception

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

People arriving at a new place or considering joining a group usually face fear, uncertainty and doubts. **They are unsure they are welcome and if they have a voice in this new place.** You want to encourage them to step in, present themselves and be accepted as members of the community.

Forces

- An already formed cohesive group may give the impression of a closed society
- New people who consider joining a group feel fear, uncertainty and doubts (As described by the online term of Newbie[13]).
- It is important to have new blood flowing into the community
- The first reactions a new participant receive, form part of the factors in creating the first impression and decision whether to stay or surf on
- More participants widen the variety of opinions, information and interaction in the community

Solution

Place a welcoming message in response to the first posting of each new person. You can use this welcoming message to convey the community ground rules and values and voice expectation for future contributions from the new member. Make sure your message does not scare people away by placing too much on their shoulders...

Resulting Context

New people visiting or joining the community receive encouragement that their presence is approved and welcomed, that this community cares about people and as a result they are heartened in posting more contributions or questions thus enriching the interaction in the community.

However, a welcoming message that gives too much emphasis on rules and expectations may intimidate and also, since this message is repeated every time a new person joins the community, become dreary and spiral energies down instead of be a boost. The best would be a message that concentrates on the joy of reception, gives a hint at future possibilities and points to the community rules.

As you referred new members to the community rules in the very first message you sent them, you can later on use this if the need will arise to monitor negative or unwanted activity or correct misbehavior.

Known Uses

1. Ward's Wiki[5] WelcomeVisitors[14] page:

“ Welcome to the WikiWikiWeb (also known as WardsWiki, or even just "Wiki"). Lots of people have their first wiki experience here. This community has been around since 1995 and consists of many people. We always accept newcomers with valuable contributions. If you haven't used a wiki before, be prepared for a bit of CultureShock. The beauty of Wiki is in the freedom, simplicity, and power it offers.

The primary focuses are PeopleProjectsAndPatterns in SoftwareDevelopment. However, it is much more than just an InformalHistoryOfProgrammingIdeas. It started there, but the theme has created a culture and DramaticIdentity all its own. All Wiki content is WorkInProgress. It changes as people come and go. Much of the information here is subjective. If you are looking for a dedicated reference site, try Wikipedia. The page goes on suggesting activities you are encouraged to experinece, explains which behaviors are frowned upon and provides pointers for people who are interested in other types of Wikis. “

2. Pedagogical Patterns[8] Web site welcome page includes the following sections:

“
Click [here](#) for the patterns we currently work on!

Then continues to offer the following text sections:

What are Pedagogical Patterns

Pattern Languages

Who is part of this project

And the page ends with this message:

We are always looking for more ideas, and for people who are able to validate the patterns, i.e. can see their own practice reflected in the patterns we have collected. This is an important aspect of any patterns project.

This page contains some example patterns created as part of the project. We encourage everybody to try them out and give us feedback.

“

3. Members of the Israeli online forum portal Tapuz[12] created a visual explanation on "the art of threading" to help newbies understand how to respond in threads. {X}

Related Patterns

Set The Pegs[15] shows how setting the ground rules in the first encounter may resolve problems and set the ground rules for group work.

Welcome Area[1] provides space in the online collaboration framework for interactions with newcomers.

Name

Empowering Contributors

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

If you become the single contributor in the community you are most likely to either dry up or create a feeling of an autocracy in the community. You also want to encourage members of the community to pitch in.

Forces

- Being a sole contributor you are likely to dry up of ideas and energy as time goes by
- A sole (or too few) contributor(s) may create a feeling of an autocracy in the community
- It is easier for people to receive more than to be active and give effort
- Some people may feel they have no worthy contributions to offer
- Praise is motivator for people
- Appreciation can increase self esteem of members in the community and motivate them
- Appreciation of contribution and respect also motivate people

Solution

Start the culture of appreciating and acknowledging contributions made by community members. Make sure you acknowledge not just the experts for sharing their insights, but also the newbies for contributing their questions, the skeptics for their doubts, and the adversaries for challenging the complacency.

Resulting Context

Expressing appreciation and acknowledgment to people for meaningful contribution to the community are rewarding people, which both refuel their energy (see **Recharge Giving** pattern) and cause them to continue to put in their contribution and others will be inspired to do so too. You also give people reasons to stay in the community and contribute to it and the community becomes a place where people share a culture that acknowledges and celebrates interaction by any of its members and guests.

Also some people who may have felt they cannot offer worthy contributions, as they see other people's efforts are appreciated, may be encouraged to contribute even at a small scale at the beginning or increase their contribution if it was small at first, maybe become strong contributors in the community.

However, overdoing may cause participants to feel patronized. Inconsistent recognition for contributors may cause people to feel prejudiced against or frustrated.

Known Uses

1. Ward's Wiki[5] Egoless Wiki[16] page offers a way of empowering all contributors:
“ ... EgolessWiki is the recognition that all contributions to Wiki are owned by no-one, but belong to the entire WikiCommunity. Mantra: ItsNotMyWiki. This is very similar to CollectiveCodeOwnership... “

2. Pedagogical Patterns[8] Web site empowers contributors by:
“ We are always looking for more ideas, and for people who are able to validate the patterns, i.e. can see their own practice reflected in the patterns we have collected. This is an important aspect of any patterns project.
This page contains some example patterns created as part of the project. We encourage everybody to try them out and give us feedback. “

Related Patterns

Just Say Thanks in Fearless Change illustrates how this can be done in fostering changes[9]
Gold Star[17] explains about praise as motivator in pedagogical patterns.
Skunkworks[18] shows how pride in membership acts as a motivator.
Reward[1] provides community members with virtual currency that can be used to purchase services within the community. This currency is won when they positively contribute to the community

Name

Knowledge Repository

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

The purists flame everyone who asks an 'old' question or respond with humor to a serious post; newbies are rebuffed; traffic drops to a doze-producing level of a few minor issues; all interesting discussions happen by private email and are limited to a few participants; the purists spend lots of time self-righteously congratulating each other on keeping off-topic threads off the list[19].

As the community becomes more active and known it draws outside people interested in its domain of interest – either as a passing need for information or as possible new members. This may reflect in the form of a few repeating questions posted for the community members, but while these questions present a real need of the visiting people, they become a burden to the community members and to the ongoing interaction. This may result in either ignoring the questions or replies that are less than polite or too short to be helpful. **But while those questions present a real need, the less than polite replies can scare away possible new members or create bad reputation for the community.**

Forces

- Visitors present questions that express a viable need
- Repetition of the same questions tend to tire and irritate people
- Being able to provide for a viable need helps turn your site and community important
- Visitors who got an answer to their needs and were left with a good feeling are potential future members of the community.

Solution

Create and collect data and items of information or interest in the community space that answer these viable needs and present them in an easily accessible location. Monitor and refer the people who visit and ask those repeating questions to this location, while leaving room for future interaction.

Resulting Context

Having a way to give answer to those questions that represent a viable need can reduce the interruption to the interaction and the burden on the constant members of the community and also help turning your site into a known location to seek information in the domain of interest, so that any person who is interested or has a need of knowledge in this domain will arrive to your site. This gives it a prestige that your members share.

By leaving room for future interaction in referring visitors to the repository you increase the chances that some of these people will stay and join the community or return in the future to become members of the community.

Not only this, amassing significant and useful knowledge in the repository contributes to the reputation of your site – which in turn also can bring in more people.

However, pay attention that referring to the **Knowledge Repository** is done in a friendly way, such that also leaves room for further questions and clarifications (maybe even a hint of future participation in the community) so it doesn't not become a rude setting aside of non-members. That will not encourage them to either visit again nor recommend you to others. Make sure the **Knowledge Repository** is presented and phrased in a way that does not deter participants from contributing to it or discussing its contents – otherwise the knowledge repository may fade out and die...

Known Uses

1. Usenet newsgroups provides FAQs – lists of answers to Frequently Asked Questions[20] to collect common wisdom that is useful for anybody interested in the newsgroup's topic

The comp.realtime newsgroup FAQ[21] includes the following sections:

What's new in the FAQ?

I- INTRODUCTION

What is the purpose of this FAQ?

What is the charter of comp.realtime?

Where should I ask questions about real-time systems?

What is considered good net.etiquette on comp.realtime?

II- DEFINITIONS

III- PUBLICATIONS COVERING REAL-TIME TOPICS

IV- POLEMIC TOPICS

V- MARKET

VI- RESEARCH AND FREE PRODUCTS

VII- CONTRIBUTIONS AND FAQ LOCATION

“

2. Ward's Wiki has NewUserPages[22] to point at information for people who are new to the Wiki:

“

Welcome to the "WikiWikiWeb"! This page assumes that you are new to the wiki concept and don't know much about it. Here we list some of the more important pages to read to get you up to speed on what Wiki is, as well as how to use it. Follow any of the links below and use the Back button on your browser to return to this page if desired.

WelcomeVisitors - An official welcome and some guidance on where to start.

...

WikiPedia - A wiki-based encyclopedia - very useful for general topics. Independent of this wiki.

Note to people adding links to this page: there are many Wiki pages, but few of them are good starting points for new users. Please keep the links on this page focused on new users' needs. Also, please try to keep them in an order that is useful for newcomers. Thank you!

“

3. Pedagogical Patterns[8] Web site puts information about what are patterns and what are pedagogical patterns up front – on its home page:

“
What are Pedagogical Patterns

Patterns are designed to capture best practice in a specific domain. Pedagogical patterns try to capture expert knowledge of the practice of teaching and learning.

...

lunchtimemama, a forum moderator at steampowered.com has craeted a short Flash movie that explains Newbies how to use a forum[23].

“

Related Patterns

Personal Touch[9] explains how the ways a new idea can be useful and valuable to an individual help promote the idea. **Knowledge Repository** is one way of making this happen using online presence.

FAQ[1] provides additional insights into process and framework aspects of this problem. **Hall of Fame**[1] and **Letter of Recommendation**[1] provide merit-based mechanisms for different modes aimed at providing newbies with answers, as well as rating and acknowledging **Knowledge Repository** contributors.

Name

Collecting The Honey

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

The people in your community have been seeking and collecting information in the shared domain of interest for some time. Each person provides additional perspectives, insights, experiences and healthy curiosity. These contributions trigger contributions from more community members.

Problem

The interaction in an online community produces discussions, brainstorming, the bringing together of knowledge view points and insights from many people all versed or interested in the shared domain of interest. **The unique input of knowledge, insights, integration of information, the results of the synergy between participants, all will be accessible to all for some time and then be moved on to the archives (in the better case) or be deleted to save space for new data (in the worse case), and will no longer be easily retrievable for fellow enthusiasts or researchers.**

Forces

- The synergy of people versed and interested in a certain domain of interest is unique and cannot easily be re-created.
- This coming together can produce exceptional results – the collection of knowledge, opinions discussions and insights.
- Since online discussions tend to accumulate and disappear into archives, this entire unique outcome may lay in oblivion, or at least unused.
- The results of contributors' efforts', activities and the ongoing synergetic interaction are worth preserving.
- Over time information and information sources disappear or grow out of date
- Over time, new people join the community and veteran community members stop participating

Solution

Continuously monitor the community space and collect information generated during the interaction among community members, adding it to the Knowledge Repository.
Give credit to each of the contributors (see **Empowering Contributors** pattern)

Resulting Context

By collecting the resulting data and contribution you increase the affectivity of your site as a source of knowledge in the domain of interest, thus attracting more people. By acknowledging the contributions and encouraging future contributions from them and from additional community members as you can see in **Empowering Contributors** pattern. However, using this pattern may require a lot of effort and time on your part both in following what is going on in all the interactions and in collecting from the ongoing activity in the

community space and then placing it in the **Knowledge Repository**. Wikis resolve this problem by relying on collective ownership, some online forums resolve this problem by allowing participants to point out such items or maintain the contents of the **Knowledge Repository**.

Also, make sure collection of knowledge items is not done in a manner that prevents people from discussing these items or challenging them – stagnation, failure to update or discuss issues can impair the usefulness of the **Knowledge Repository** and lead to slow death[19].

Known Uses

1. Wikis such as Ward's Wiki use self moderation by community members to maintain the Knowledge Repository of their topical Wiki.
2. Pedagogical Patterns dedicated a page to Example Patterns[11] contributed by participants. The top of the page encourages community member participation: This page contains some example patterns created as part of the project. We encourage everybody to try them out and give us feedback.

Related Patterns

Hall of Fame[1] and **Letter of Recommendation**[1] provide merit-based mechanisms for different modes aimed at providing newbies with answers, as well as rating and acknowledging **Knowledge Repository** contributors.

Name

Community Culture

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

Sometimes communities deteriorate into competitions among community members on issues such as respect (expertise, knowledge, authority, titles) or resources (customers, knowledge, self-advertising).

Forces

- Even when working in a community people still may get into ego quarrels
- When people perceive resources to be scarce they may try to fight over them
- Some individual needs (“what’s in it for me?”) need to be addressed to sustain a viable community
- Shared values and codes of conduct contribute to community cohesion
- Shared values and codes of conduct reduce the need for police activity on your side
- When an online community leader has to use too much policing it tends to create a feeling of functional community
- People prefer to be treated fairly over being prejudiced against.

Solution

Establish a community culture that values and rewards sharing insights, knowledge, experience, resources and mutual support among community members by applying the patterns: **Seeding; Welcoming Reception; Empowering Contributors; Collecting The Honey; Social Glue;** and **Recharge Giving.**

Make sure you apply and enforce these in a fair manner and continuously test them against the set of goals of the community.

Resulting Context

Seeing what community culture and values are presented, praised, expected and encouraged helps people to learn and absorb them, act accordingly and expect others to act similarly, in fact this creates a process of socialization into the inner-culture of the specific online community.

Known Uses

Related Patterns

Hall of Fame[1] shows one way of implementing this pattern in collaboration frameworks. **Gold Star**[17] shows how this is done in pedagogical context.

Name

Sustaining Activity

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

How do you keep the community from falling asleep – which usually leads to abandoning the site[19]?

Forces

- Participation in online communities is voluntary and based on will and interest.
- People may be timid about posting questions / topics for discussion
- Many people are more willing to respond rather than initiate.

Solution

Monitor community activity and make sure that new stimulus arrive at regular intervals such as observations, discussions, questions, hosting specialists, so that people who are familiar with the site – will find something new for them.

If you see that there are no spontaneous stimuli coming from participants – you need to trigger them by presenting lures (questions for discussions, invite specialists, post polls, present new links or news stories related to your domain of interest, and so on).

Make sure you present these lures at intervals that are not too frequent as to “overfeed” (thus leaving less enticement for other members to contribute stimuli) but also are not too far apart, so as not to let the activity “die out”.

Resulting Context

By keeping a minimal level of activity and interest in the community space, you provide both a stimulus for community members to participate (maybe even encouraged and/or inspired to post their own stimuli) and make sure there is new content to interest visitors and members checking in to see what’s going on (since members cannot participate continuously and take breaks for such trivia as work, food or even sleep).

However, the user of this pattern will need to commit his/her time to monitor community activity and energy to think up ideas for questions and other stimuli. A solution for that can be to have a reserve of questions you put down whenever they occur to you to be used in those instances of need.

Too many threads initiated by a single person land the site with an autocratic atmosphere and reduces interaction.

Also, an overdose effect is that that people feel manipulated by the questions raised by too frequent stimuli.

Known Uses

1. The following poll on the role of the moderator[24] was spotted on the MacNN forum:

I would like to see the opinion of this board's members as to what you think the job of the moderator should be. Should we allow borderline posts to stay, hoping that people will use their discretion when reading it? Or should we delete it outright if it is even remotely offensive, sarcastic, or otherwise

...

I have read many different posts in many different places, and it has come to my attention that some think we are doing too much while others believe we do too little. Please, this forum is for everyone; tell me how you would like me moderate for you. Tell us all how you would like us to moderate for you. I am a blank slate, waiting to be filled. If you do not wish to post here for fear of being singled out, please email me at blizzard_50@hotmail.com and I will see that your ideas get the attention they deserve

Related Patterns

Empowering Contributors presents additional solution for promoting participation of community members.

Sustained Momentum and **Step by Step** in [9] show how this pattern can be implemented in communities aimed at introducing changes.

"Pacing" in the article "Maximizing the Well-Being of Online Groups"[25].

User List, Spontaneous Collaboration, Active Neighbors, Interactive User Info, Remote Viewport, Remote Selection, Remote Cursor, Commented Action and **Change Indicator** in [1] provide mechanisms for becoming aware of other user's actions.

Activity Log, Timeline, Periodic Report, Activity Indicator, Life Indicator and **Away Messages** in [1] facilitate the process of noting absent participants.

Name

Social Glue

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

Relative anonymity sometimes causes people to feel uncomfortable, encourages flame wars[26] and prejudices and assumptions about other faceless participants. These in turn reduce the willingness to contribute and raise people's fears, uncertainties and doubts.

Forces

- The relative anonymity of the medium
- People seek a comfortable level of social cohesion
- People have a need to be unique and appreciated in their community

Solution

Introduce activities and games for getting more acquainted with each other.

Such games and activities can be one or all of the following: short light questionnaires that help learn more of each participants who answers them, Stage Center Guest where one of the members is the guest and everyone can ask them questions or the guest may tell five things nobody knows about him/her [see appendix for details of these games].

When introducing such games, it is advisable to declare rules and examples that will keep the game non-intrusive, polite and humorous, to avoid hurt feelings or even damage.

Resulting Context

Creating a feeling of a community and not a collection of individuals may reduce the risk of bickering and flame wars in the forum/space and improves the social fabric.

However, since it may be that not all people will feel comfortable with such ideas, you may want to consider how you want to present these to the community members – for example call them “games” if community members are amenable to levity, or – if community members are a more serious people - call them “activities” and also consider when to present them (the order of games and the stage of life of the community).

Make sure people can safely say "No" to participating in these activities – as such games carry the potential risk of uneven exposure of some members

Known Uses

Related Patterns

Using the pattern **Recharge Giving** can help in maintaining the **Social Glue**.

Name

Recharge Giving

Context

Throughout the community lifecycle.

Problem

Studies show that normally there is a larger percentage of people asking questions than people answering them, this creates a situation of single sided energy sapping, and could exhaust the active members of the community.

Forces

- Contributing requires resources from participants such as time, knowledge, activity
- Continuous depletion of resources causes people to reduce their giving to the community

Solution

Introduce ‘giving games’ to refresh the giving in the community and recharge its members with renewed energies. Such games can be one or all of the following: Giant/Dwarf, Attention Giving, Search Tag, etc [see **Appendix** for details of these games].

Resulting Context

By playing giving games you allow people to rediscover of the joys of giving and receiving. You are also restoring the sense of fun and reinforcing the value of having fun in the community.

However, Some people do not like games or may think playing games is childish and therefore inappropriate, these people can (in the better case) not participate or (in the worse case) express resistance, both these reactions might spoil the fun or even ruin the affectivity of the games.

Make it socially acceptable for people to avoid participating in games (i.e., by asking people to send a private message to the moderator if they want to participate).

Known Uses

See **Appendix** for details of these games

Related Patterns

Name

Suitable Platform

Discussion

There is a wide variety of platforms for online communities. We compare a few of them using a few criteria:

Platform	Access Mode	Who can initiate a discussion?	Technical Complexity		Moderation overhead	What shows up on top?
			Moderator	Participants		
Wiki	Pull	Anyone	High-Medium	Highest	Lowest	Depends on Wiki structure and entry point
Blog	Pull	Moderator	Highest	Medium	Low (unless flamewars erupt)	Most recent entries
Newsgroup	Pull	Anyone, unless moderated	High-Medium	Medium	Medium (unless spam or flamewars erupt)	Most recent entries
Mailing List	Push	Anyone, unless moderated	Low	Lowest	Medium (unless spam or flamewars erupt)	Most recent entries
Forum	Pull	Anyone, unless moderated	Low-Medium	Low	High	Most recent entries

What you should consider before selecting the online platform:

- Who is the target audience for my online community?
- What is the most likely level of technical proficiency for community members?
- Which platforms are they likely to be familiar with?
- What is your level of technical proficiency?
- What kind of activities do you want to facilitate in your community?
- What is the style of moderation you prefer for the community?

Appendix – Online Games

Following are full descriptions and rules of the Games discussed in the patterns.

Note, we are mostly using descriptive names for the games, to help describe them.

Some of these games may already have other names in different languages, (we will be glad to learn them) or you can give them a name that can use slang, child idioms etc.

Indeed we've seen that some of the games were given slightly different names even in different forums to help it fit better to the nature, needs and/or interests of the different communities in which they were played.

Giants and Dwarves

This game is actually adapted to the virtual environment from youth-groups and school.

Each member of the group is called the dwarf for the duration of the game, and is assigned (normally in a random way) another member of the group, who will be called the Giant for the duration of the game.

The dwarves' mission is to shower their giants with positive attention without the giant discovering them. Part of the fun of the game is the guessing as to who might be who's giant or dwarf.

The positive attention from the dwarves can be expressed in many ways: leaving tiny presents for the giant to find, leaving funny notes for them, locating lyrics of songs they like etc.

Another part of the fun is the many ways dwarves would use to bestow the presents without the giants discovering who they are.

The organizers of the game usually do check that a person will not be assigned as his own giant.

Attention Giving (“tzumi”)

This game/activity originated as far as we can tell in online forums, normally those attended by youth, meant to apply to the need for social acknowledgement of participants, and is carried to the side of the shared domain of interest of the forum.

Any participant can open a separate thread (or if one already exists join it) to ask for other participants attention to some personal difficulty. Such difficulties can vary from general bad mood through bad spate with the parents to some conflict with school etc.

Other participants are welcomed to either give advise or just acknowledge the issue and the feelings of the writer.

Using this activity some of the personal issues that could disrupt the forum are dealt with in a manner that allows for the main topics to stay paramount in the forum space.

* The name “tzumi” is a slang word referring to the need for attention – a Hebrew version of TLC (Tender, Loving Care).

Search Tag

This is another social game we know mostly from youth attended forums, meant to apply to the need of forum members for social support, and is carried to the side of the topics and discussions on the shared domain of interest.

Any forum member can open this “game” and declare the ask for help in searching for information, which can be on any subject, not only in the the shared domain of interest of the forum. The participant that brings back the information can in turn ask for information they need, also on any subject, and the tag can continue in this manner.

Stage Center Guest

This game is meant to answer the wish of forum members to get to know participants better, beyond the shared domain of interest

Every few days one of the forum members becomes the game's guest and other forum members are invited to ask them questions meant to get to know them better – preferably on issues other than the shared domain of interest of the forum

It is advisable to monitor the questions for

A – Making sure their will not be too intrusive and phrased politely

B – The number of questions each participant asks, to allow for as many members as possible to participate equally (and maintain the **Social Glue**)

Light Questionnaires

This activity is another tool that helps forum members to get to know each other a little more.

The idea is to present a few questions for all the forum members to answer,

The questions should preferably be:

- Few! so that participants will be able to both answer and (more importantly) read other participants' answers.

- Relating to different topics, either at the same questionnaire or each one.

- Lighthearted to help insert some levity to the forum page without disturbing the main topics discussed.

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Any errors, mistakes and misunderstandings are ours, of course...

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